

Political Psychology



VOLUME 33 • NUMBER 5 • OCTOBER 2012

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POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Journal of the International Society of Political Psychology

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POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY (ISSN 0162-895X, online ISSN 1467-9221), is published bimonthly on behalf of the International Society of Political Psychology by Wiley Subscription Services, Inc., a Wiley Company, 111 River St., Hoboken, NJ 07030-5774. Periodical Postage Paid at Hoboken, NJ, and additional offices.

Postmaster: Send all address changes to POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY, Journal Customer Services, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 350 Main St., Malden, MA 02148-5020.

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ISSN 0162-895X (Print)

ISSN 1467-9221 (Online)

Printed in Singapore by Ho Printing Pte Ltd.

¹The overall composition of the Board is 40% women, 43% psychologists, 57% political scientists, and 40% scholars from outside the United States.

Does the Candidate Matter? Comparing the Voting Choice of Early and Late Deciders

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Candidate personality traits have long been recognized as influential in the determination of voting choice. However, little is understood of how the perception of candidates' traits influences different categories of voters. Based on a large-scale electoral-panel survey (ITANES, Italian National Election Studies), the present study investigated whether the voting choice of early and late deciders differentially relied on candidate traits. Results showed that after considering the influence of ideology and economy assessment, candidate traits still influenced the voting choice of early deciders and, even more, of late deciders. However, while early deciders took into account both incumbent and challenger traits, late deciders mainly relied on incumbent traits. Political sophistication moderated this effect, with high-sophisticated early deciders relying even more on the challenger, and low-sophisticated late deciders relying even more on the incumbent. The distinction between incumbent and challenger is discussed as a key variable in explaining the role of candidate traits in the choice of voters differing as to voting decision time and political sophistication.

KEY WORDS: candidate personality traits, voting uncertainty, voting choice, political sophistication, incumbency effect

Contemporary politics is characterized by an increased attention to the political protagonists instead of political issues (inter alia Schoen & Schumann, 2007). Candidate personality traits are likely, therefore, to strongly influence voting choice. However, research data on how this influence may vary for different categories of voters are neither numerous nor consistent. One interesting question is whether the perception of candidate traits equally influences voting choice for voters who know in advance whom they will vote for (i.e., early deciders) and voters who have only recently made their voting choice and were previously undecided (i.e., late deciders). In several democratic countries, the number of late deciders has increased (see Dalton, 2000; Irwin & Van Holsteyn, 2008; McAllister, 2002; Plasser, Ulram, & Seeber, 2003; Schmitt-Beck, 2003), which has created difficulties for predicting election outcomes (Durand, Blais, & Larochelle, 2004; Visser, Krosnick, Marquette, & Curtin, 2000). However, relatively little research has examined the difference between early and late deciders.

The present study was designed to better understand the role of candidate personality traits in the voting decision of early and late deciders. In doing so, we evaluated the influence of candidate traits taking into account the distinction between incumbent and challenger candidates and the possible moderating influence of voters' political sophistication.

We examined these issues using data from a large-scale electoral panel survey (ITALian National Election Studies, ITANES 2006)¹, which allowed us to assess voting certainty some time prior to the election, and then the actual voting decision after the election.

In the following introductory sections, we first take into account previous research on how much candidates matter in the voting choice of diverse categories of voters. We then consider the relative weight of the candidates against a more stable predictor of vote, that is, ideology, and we also examine the distinction between the traits of the incumbent and the challenger. After considering the characteristics of early and late deciders, we define our expectations in relation to how much incumbent and challenger traits may count in the choice of these two groups of voters. Finally, we focus on the possibility of generalizing our data from the Italian context, in which the present research has been conducted, to other contexts.

Candidate Personality Traits and Voting Choice

Contemporary politics is characterized by an increased attention to the political protagonists (e.g., their public and private lives) instead of political issues (Barisione, 2009; Caprara, Schwartz, Capanna, Vecchione, & Barbaranelli, 2006; Schoen & Schumann, 2007). The decline of ideological voting, the loosening of ties between citizens and political parties, and, most of all, the increased role of the media in politics have been cited as causes of this change (inter alia Hacker, 2004; King, 2002). The growing phenomenon of the personalization of politics is accompanied by the development of more detailed research on the characteristics and behaviors of politicians that influence the voter's perception. It has been observed that the image of the candidate is a widely used heuristic among the electorate (Lau & Redlask, 2001; Marcus, Neuman, & McKuen, 2000). Age, sex, race, and physical appearance or the candidate's clothing have been shown to influence voting choice (e.g., Rosenberg, Bohan, McCafferty, & Harris, 1986; Rosenberg & Kahn, 1987). More recent research has turned its attention to other aspects of candidate image, such as verbal and nonverbal behavior. Such research has analyzed how the politician's content and style of verbal communication, as well as the politician's tone of voice, affect voter choice (e.g., De Landtsheer, 2000, 2004; De Landtsheer, De Vries, & Vertessen, 2008).

Voters use all the above information to make inferences about personality *traits* of political candidates (Funk, 1996; McGraw, 2003). Reasoning in terms of traits allows organizing information about politicians around few stable dimensions (*dispositional heuristic*; see Caprara et al., 2006). Since these individual trait inferences are considered stable, they allow us to describe and distinguish politicians and to make predictions regarding their behavior. Certain personality traits are more important than others for our perception of political candidates. For example, Immelman (1998, 1999, 2002) and Immelman and Beatty (2004) have not only shown the existence of some specific personality profiles of political leaders that voters share, but have also shown that some of these are associated with a higher probability of winning elections. Two dimensions that are crucial in the perception of political candidates are *leadership* and *morality*, measured by traits such as "*determined*" for the first dimension and "*reliable*" for the second (Barisione & Catellani, 2008; Caprara et al., 2006; Caprara, Schwartz, Vecchione, & Barbaranelli, 2008; Cislak & Wojciszke, 2006, 2008; Kinder, 1986; Mondak, 1995; Pierce, 1993; Wojciszke & Klusek, 1996). Election surveys conducted in several countries, such as the American National Election Studies (ANES), regularly include the measurement of personality traits related to these dimensions, usually asking voters to say whether or to what degree a certain trait is apt to describe a candidate (Kinder, 1986; Miller, Wattenberg, & Malanchuk, 1986; Pierce, 1993). The same method was used in the ITANES survey this research is

¹ The ITANES group has been analyzing the Italians' voting behavior since the beginning of the 1990s. Readers interested in this research program should visit the website www.itanes.org.

based on, which offered us the possibility of comparing candidate trait perception of early and late deciders.

Previous research has shown that candidate trait perception is an important predictor of voting choice (Bartels, 2002; Jacobson, 1981; Kinder, 1986; Kinder & Abelson, 1981; Miller & Shanks, 1996; Miller et al., 1986). However, data on the differential influence of this predictor on the voting choice of different categories of voters are limited and controversial. Early research suggested that the perception of the candidate traits has more influence on the voting choice of less sophisticated voters (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; Nie, Verba, & Petrocik, 1976). More recently, however, candidate perception has been found to be important also in determining voting choice for more sophisticated voters, and in some situations more sophisticated voters seem to take into account candidate personality traits even more than less sophisticated voters (Brown, Lambert, Kay, & Curtis, 1988; Gidengil, 2003; Glass, 1985; Kroh, 2004).

In the case of early and late deciders, the limited available data on the candidate's impact on the voting choice of these two groups do not provide clear results. Some studies suggest that the candidate effects on voting are strongest when the number of late deciders is greater (Barisione, 2009; Dalton, 2006). Other studies, however, suggest that candidate perception would be even more relevant for the voting choice of early deciders instead of late deciders (e.g., Gidengil, 2003).

In the current study, we dealt with the issue of individual differences in the influence of the candidates on voting choice, taking into account both voting decision time and voter's political sophistication. We also considered it appropriate to assess the candidates' impact after controlling for the effect of another important vote predictor, that is, ideology.

Candidate Personality Traits, Ideology, and Voting Choice

Ideology is a relatively stable predictor of vote, rooted in a long-term relationship between the voter and politics (Lau, 2003; Rahn, 1993). Compared to ideology, candidate perception is linked instead to short-term evaluations of the current political situation. Candidate perception is not necessarily rooted on a sound and well-organized political knowledge. On the contrary, it is often based on surface information (Popkin, 1991), whose salience is strongly influenced by electoral campaign characteristics (Keeter, 1987), such as current opinion or media coverage.

Therefore, assessing the relative influence that candidates and ideology have on the voting choice of different categories of voters is definitely worthwhile. Several studies have shown that reference to ideological schemes is more frequent in the voting choice of people who have a high level of political involvement and sophistication (Brady & Sniderman, 1985; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991).

To our knowledge, no research to date has analyzed the joint influence of ideology and candidate perception on the voting choice of early versus late deciders. In this article, we addressed this issue by assuming that reference to a "deep" factor such as ideology would not be necessarily done at the expense of an apparently more "superficial" factor such as candidate personality traits (see Lau & Redlawsk, 2001). Such an assumption is consistent with recent models of persuasion, namely, Kruglanski, Thompson, and Spiegel's (1999) Unimodel of persuasion, which is in contrast to Petty and Cacioppo's Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM, 1981, 1986). According to ELM, less sophisticated and/or motivated people are influenced more by the source of a persuasive message, while more sophisticated and/or motivated people are influenced more by the content of the message. In contrast, according to the Unimodel, a sophisticated person's prevailing attention to the source rather than the content of a message depends on how the information is presented. When available information regarding the source of a message is dominant (especially in terms of length and complexity) relative to the content, sophisticated people can process information regarding the source as much, or even more than information regarding the content. Therefore, according to the

Unimodel, more sophisticated people may assign even more attention to the message source than less sophisticated people. However, more and less sophisticated people use source information differently. More sophisticated people, by integrating source information with already stored information, engage in more in-depth processing of source information. Less sophisticated people, on the other hand, base their decision mainly on source information, resulting in more surface processing of such information.

Reflecting on the possibility of extending the Unimodel to the political context, Kerkhof (1999) demonstrated that the media often provide a wealth of information about the candidate (i.e., the message source) rather than on the actual content of the candidate's political message (see also Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004; Delli-Carpini, Huddy, & Shapiro, 1996; Popkin, 1991). Thus, the political environment seems to be an ideal context in which to test hypotheses of Kruglanski et al.'s (1999) Unimodel. One can expect that with voters, including those who are more motivated and/or sophisticated, a close consideration of a "superficial" factor such as the candidates' traits would go hand in hand with reference to a "deeper" factor such as ideology. Accordingly, in the current research we expected that candidate traits would influence the voting choice of both early and late deciders, even after controlling for the effect of ideology.

The Incumbency Effect

To further examine the weight of the candidate on the voting choice of different categories of voters, a distinction which may be important to consider, but to date has been little explored, is the distinction between the incumbent and the challenger (Weisberg, 2002).

It is assumed that when people vote, they can base their voting choice more on their perception of the incumbent than on that of the challenger (*incumbency effect*; see Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1996; Lau, 2003). This is especially true if the incumbent has a long-lasting experience in government. In this situation, the incumbent is the most familiar candidate because he/she is the one about whom we have accumulated more information. Another reason why voters might base their voting choice more on the incumbent is related to the economic conditions of the country. According to the economic voting theory, in bad economic conditions voters' attention would be especially focused on the incumbent because he/she would be considered responsible for the bad situation (Kramer, 1971; Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2007; Shepsle, 1972). The increased attention on the incumbent as opposed to the challenger, however, may also be present regardless of the effect due to an economic vote (Weisberg, 2002). Certain factors, including the greater ability of the incumbent to draw the attention of the media and dictate the agenda (Abramson, Aldrich, & Rhode, 1998), as well as so-called "political inertia" (Campbell, 2000), make it plausible to expect that the incumbency effect is a more general effect, not necessarily tied to the economic considerations of the voters.

Some scholars have also suggested that the incumbency effect may be more pronounced for voters who are less motivated and/or politically sophisticated. Voters who are less sophisticated would limit their attention to more easily available information, which is precisely that of the incumbent (Bartels, 1996; Sniderman, Brody, & Tetlock, 1991; Zaller, 1992). On the other hand, voters who are more motivated and/or sophisticated would be inclined to engage in deeper information processing, taking into account new information regarding the challenger and perhaps comparing that to information regarding the incumbent.

To date, there is an absence of empirical data on the varying effect that incumbent and challenger traits may have on voting choice for different categories of voters. In the present research, we investigated the influence of incumbent and challenger traits on the voting choice of early and late deciders. As shown in the following section, we expected to find differences, starting from the different characteristics of the two groups.

Candidate Personality Traits and Voting Decision Time

Despite the growing phenomenon of voter uncertainty, we still lack conclusive evidence on differences between late and early deciders (see Arcuri, Castelli, Galdi, Zogmaister, & Amadori, 2008; Roccato & Zogmaister, 2010; Schmitt-Beck, 2009).

Many researchers have wondered if late deciders are more or less politically sophisticated. These researchers have proposed varied and partially contradictory theories (see Schmitt-Beck, 2009). According to some researchers, a portion of late deciders can be described as being strategic, independent voters, free from constraints of various kinds, such as ideology, religion, or geographical origin, and developing their voting choice through a careful evaluation of available political information prior to elections (Chaffee & Rimal, 1996; Dalton, 1984, 2000; Irwin & Van Holsteyn, 2008). According to other researchers, a large majority of late deciders are less politically sophisticated than early deciders, where less political sophistication is defined as a composite of low interest in politics and low political knowledge (Alvarez, 1998; Barisione, 2001, 2009; Zaller, 2004). Psychosocial research on the relationship between attitudes and behavior (Fazio, 1986; Fazio, Chen, McDonel, & Sherman, 1982; Fazio & Zanna, 1981) supports this expectation. This research suggests that ease of attitude retrieval from memory and certainty of attitude determine attitude strength that in turn directs behavior. While availability is determined by the frequency or recency of attitude use, certainty is the result of clarity and consistency of the information available, as well as the personal sense of self-confidence (Gross, Holtz, & Miller, 1995). Fazio and collaborators have demonstrated that less sophisticated people in a domain generally have weaker attitudes than more sophisticated people, resulting in attitudes being retrieved more slowly from memory and, relevant to our research, more uncertainty regarding attitudes.

This does not mean that voting certainty and political sophistication fully coincide. Sophistication can facilitate voting certainty, but voting certainty is a less stable, more context-bound factor, which depends on the motives that may or may not induce the voter to decisively take sides early (Schmitt-Beck, 2009). In our study, we expected that pre-electoral uncertainty would be related to, but would not coincide with, low political sophistication. On this basis, we developed expectations regarding the influence of candidate traits on the voting choice of early and late deciders.

Consistent with what we said in the previous paragraph regarding deeper candidate information processing by voters who are more motivated and/or sophisticated, we expected that the challenger's traits would matter more in the voting choice of early deciders than in the one of late deciders, who would almost exclusively focus their attention on the incumbent's traits. We also expected to find a moderating effect of political sophistication, in the sense that a high or low level of sophistication would further accentuate the difference in weight given to the traits of the incumbent and challenger for early and late deciders.

The Italian Context

An important assumption of this research is that the Italian election survey, the Italian political scene, the media coverage of Italian politics, and the rise of late deciders in Italian elections is broadly similar to other European and non-European democratic systems. First, it is to be noted that the structure of the survey used in this research (the ITANES survey) is highly similar to those utilized in other Western democracies (e.g., the ANES survey). Second, broadly speaking the United States and many other European political landscapes are largely dominated by two parties, and with the change to the so-called Second Republic of the early 90s, Italian politics also became largely dominated by two political coalition/parties. The Second Republic represented the collapse or radical change of historical political parties, the introduction of a new electoral system, and the consolidation of power in essentially a two-party political system (Baldassarri & Schadee, 2004; Sani &

Segatti, 2002). This trend, which has constructed two main opposing coalitions and their respective leaders, has turned the vote, although still in a context of a parliamentary system, into a direct choice of the coalition that will govern and a direct choice of the Prime Minister. From the citizen's perspective, therefore, this way of choosing is not very different from that of presidential systems of other countries (De Sio, 2008). Besides, the growing personalization of political campaigns and media coverage that has accompanied these changes in Italian politics has resulted in a political landscape that is more similar to than different from other Western democracies (Caprara et al., 2006, 2008). Finally, the rise of the phenomenon of late deciders has been observed in Italy in recent years (Barisione, Catellani, & De Sio, 2010) similar to that found in other countries (Dalton, 2000; Irwin & Van Holsteyn, 2008; McAllister, 2002; Plasser et al., 2003; Schmitt-Beck, 2003). Available data seem to define a common profile of late deciders, in Italy as in other Western democracies (e.g., low connection with social demographics and distance from political parties and coalitions; Barisione, 2001; Barisione et al., 2010).

Goals and Hypotheses

The main objective of this research was to investigate whether early and late deciders would differentially base their voting choice on candidate personality traits. Using data from a large-scale electoral panel survey, we were able to assess voting uncertainty prior to the election, and then the actual voting decision after the election.

A preliminary goal of our research was to verify that being late deciders correlates, though it does not coincide, with a lower level of political sophistication, while being early deciders correlates, though it does not coincide, with a higher level of political sophistication. As already mentioned, previous research has shown that there is a link between political sophistication and decision certainty (Alvarez, 1998; Barisione, 2001, 2009; Zaller, 2004), but decision certainty is also influenced by contextual and motivational factors (Schmitt-Beck, 2009). After controlling these characteristics of early and late deciders, our research aimed to verify four hypotheses about the influence of candidates' traits on the voting choice of these two groups. The first two hypotheses concern the similarities between early and late deciders; the other two concern the differences between these groups.

Hypothesis 1. Candidate traits influence the voting choice of both early and late deciders, even after controlling for the effect of ideology.

This prediction would be consistent with the above-mentioned voting models according to which reference to a "deep" factor such as ideology is not done at the expense of an apparently more "superficial" factor such as the candidate's image (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001). It would also be consistent with the extension to the political context of the Unimodel on persuasion, according to which the abundance of information on the candidates offered by the media leads all voters (including more motivated and/or sophisticated voters) to pay attention to information on the source of political messages as well as to the content of the messages themselves (Kerkhof, 1999).

Hypothesis 2. Incumbent traits weigh more than challenger traits in the voting choice of both early and late deciders, even after controlling for the effect of economy evaluation.

As mentioned above, the incumbency effect is due to the fact that information about the incumbent is more abundant and easily available (Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1996; Lau, 2003). Therefore, the focus on the incumbent would be generally stronger than the focus on the challenger even beyond considerations of the incumbent's responsibility for the economic performance (Weisberg, 2002). However, we have also seen that the tendency to focus primarily on the incum-

bent would be more pronounced for less motivated and sophisticated voters (see Bartels, 1996; Sniderman et al., 1991; Zaller, 1992). More motivated and sophisticated voters, such as early deciders, would be more inclined to pay attention to less available information and therefore would give more weight to the challenger. This speculation led us to formulate two more hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3. Challenger traits have relatively more weight in the voting choice of early deciders rather than late deciders.

Hypothesis 4. The relative influence of the incumbent and challenger traits on the voting choice of early and late deciders is moderated by political sophistication, in the sense that *early deciders* who are *more sophisticated* give an even greater weight to the *challenger traits*, while *late deciders* who are *less sophisticated* give an even greater weight to the *incumbent traits*.

Had these predictions been confirmed, we would have shown that some of the contradictions of previous research on the influence of candidates' traits on vote can be overcome by taking into account the distinction between the incumbent's and the challenger's traits, as well as the differential influence of the two candidates depending on both voting decision time and voter's political sophistication.

Method

Participants

A sample of 1,377 voters participated in the present study. They were included in the 2006 ITANES program. The ITANES uses random probability sampling technique to select respondents, creating a representative sample of eligible voters in Italy. In 2006, the ITANES program included a rolling cross-section survey and a panel survey, and data presented in this article are drawn from the second one. Between mid-February and mid-March 2006, before the 2006 Italian general elections (which took place on April 9), a sample of 2,005 participants were administered a pre-election face-to-face questionnaire. Following the elections (between mid-May and mid-June 2006), 68.7% (1,377) of the original respondents participated in a post-election face-to-face questionnaire.²

Measures

Both the pre- and the post-election questionnaires included several questions measuring different variables investigated by the ITANES group. Only those questions relevant to the research objectives of this study are reported below. Voting choice was asked in the post-election questionnaire, while the other questions were asked in the pre-election questionnaire.

Voting certainty. In the pre-election questionnaire, participants were asked whether they had already made their decision about whom they would vote for in the coming general elections. Participants were also asked to report the certainty of their choice on a 10-point scale ranging from *not at all* (1) to *very much* (10).

Political sophistication. Political sophistication was measured using a composite of knowledge and interest in politics. With regard to political knowledge, two items asked participants the names of the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the Secretary of State, and two items asked

² The exact survey data used in our research (and data from other ITANES surveys) can be downloaded from the program's website <<http://www.itanes.org/>>.

participants aspects of governmental institutions (*How is the President elected?* and *How many members sit in the House of Representatives?*). Two items measured interest in politics. One item asked participants to rate how much they were interested in politics on a 4-point scale ranging from *not at all* (1) to *very much* (4), and the other item asked participants how often they talked about politics on a 4-point scale ranging from *never* (1) to *very often* (4). To form the composite sophistication measure, knowledge and interest scores were standardized and then summated. The alpha reliability coefficient for the composite scale was .79.

Ideology. Ideology was measured using a 10-point scale ranging from *Left* (1) to *Right* (10) ($M = 5.90$; $SD = 2.71$). Of all the interviewees, 66.8% agreed to use the scale, while the remaining 33.2% either did not know where to place themselves on the scale or did not want to.

Economy evaluation. Participants were asked to rate on a 5-point scale to what extent they found the national economic conditions worse versus better during the previous year, ranging from *much worse* (1) to *much better* (5).

Candidate perception. Participants were asked to rate the incumbent, center-right candidate (Silvio Berlusconi) and the challenger, center-left candidate (Romano Prodi) along six personality traits: determined, sensible, reliable, competent, intelligent, and expert. Traits were rated on a 4-point scale, ranging from *not at all* (1) to *very much* (4) (Caprara & Barbaranelli, 2000; Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Borgogni, 1993). The order of presentation of the two candidates was counterbalanced, so that half of the respondents rated Berlusconi first and half rated Prodi first. For each candidate, we also computed a mean score of the six traits' ratings. The alpha reliability coefficients were .84 for Berlusconi's traits and .82 for Prodi's traits.

Voting choice. In the post-election questionnaire, participants were asked what party they had voted for in the House of Representatives in the recent general elections. A two-level nominal variable was created, coding vote for the center-left coalition as (1) and vote for the center-right coalition as (0).

Results

Preliminary Analyses: Characteristics of Early and Late Deciders

At the time of the pre-election interview, 415 participants (30.1%) declared to be still undecided regarding their vote, while 962 (69.9%) declared they had already decided. These two groups were compared with respect to their degree of voting certainty. As expected, undecided voters felt much less certain ($M = 5.57$, $SD = 3.23$) than decided voters ($M = 9.71$, $SD = 2.05$), $F(1, 1377) = 816.95$, $p < .001$.

To verify that interview time was not a confound we compared those who were interviewed during the first 15 days with those who had been interviewed the last 15 days of the pre-election survey. Chi-square analysis showed that the percentage of those who said they were decided (D) versus undecided (UD) was not significantly different in the first 15 days (D = 45.5% vs. UD = 54.5%) to the last 15 days of the survey (D = 47.2% vs. UD = 52.8%), $\chi^2(1, 1377) = .164$, $p = .72$. In addition, the mean certainty of participants who were interviewed in the first two weeks ($M = 8.81$) was not significantly different from participants who were interviewed over the last 15 days of the survey ($M = 8.90$), $F(1, 1056) = .25$, $p = .61$.

In the post-election questionnaire, 56.1% ($n = 233$) of undecided voters in the pre-election interview reported their voting choice and were labeled as *late deciders*, while 85.5% ($n = 823$) of decided voters reported their vote and were labeled as *early deciders*. When we compared these two groups as regards their voting certainty, we found late deciders to feel less certain ($M = 5.68$, $SD = 3.18$) than early deciders ($M = 9.76$, $SD = 2.02$), $F(1, 1056) = 558.78$, $p < .001$. These results confirmed that pre-electoral uncertainty was indeed a good indicator of late decision.

Early and late deciders were demographically compared (i.e., age, gender, and education). The two groups did not differ in terms of their age ($M = 47.48$, vs. $M = 46.36$), $F(1, 1056) = .83, p = .36$). A higher percentage of males were early deciders (53.8% vs. 45.2%), $\chi^2(1, N = 823) = 11.33, p < .001$, and a higher percentage of females were late deciders (60.7% vs. 39.3%), $\chi^2(1, N = 233) = 6.72, p < .01$. Lower level of education was associated with late deciders, such that among participants with a primary school education 51.1% were late deciders and 44.2% were early deciders, among participants with a high school education 41.6% were late deciders and 44.2% were early deciders, and finally among participants with a university degree 7.3% were late deciders and 11.5% were early deciders, $\chi^2(1, N = 1056) = 23.83, p < .05$.

Early and late deciders were also compared with respect to ideology and voting choice. For ideology, participants were compared on the 10-point self-placement scale. Early deciders ($M = 5.88, SD = 2.83$) did not differ significantly from late deciders ($M = 6.00, SD = 2.04$), $F(1, 945) = .23, p = .63$. However, among late deciders the percentage of voters who did not feel represented by either ideology was consistently higher (58.1%) than among early deciders (16.2%) $\chi^2(1, N = 269) = 11.22, p < .001$. These results supported the view that late deciders were peripheral voters who felt significant distance from the traditional idea of ideological self-placement. For voting choice, among late deciders, 41.6% reported a center-right vote, and 58.4% reported a center-left vote. Among early deciders, 43.4% reported a center-right vote, and 56.6% reported a center-left vote. Early and late deciders thus did not differ in voting choice, $\chi^2(1, N = 1056) = .22, p = .34$. This provided supporting evidence that uncertainty was not associated with a specific political orientation.

Finally, early and late deciders were compared for their level of political sophistication, using the composite index measuring knowledge and interest in politics. Late deciders showed lower sophistication than early deciders ($M = -.40$ vs. $M = .28$), $F(1, 1056) = 150.52, p < .001$. Therefore, as expected a lower level of sophistication was associated with a late decision. Political sophistication was also significantly related with pre-electoral voting certainty ($r = .31, p < .001$). The higher the certainty in the voting choice the higher the level of political sophistication, confirming the link between attitude certainty and sophistication shown by previous psychosocial research in various domains (see Fazio, 1986).

Candidate Personality Traits and Voting Choice in Early and Late Deciders

The main aim of the present study was to assess the influence of the incumbent and the challenger personality traits on the voting choice of early and late deciders, as well as possible moderating effects of political sophistication.

We performed a hierarchic logistic regression on the actual vote of the entire sample of respondents. The analysis was carried out in four steps. In Step 1, actual vote (1 = *center-left vote*; 0 = *center-right vote*) was regressed on control variables, namely, other possible vote predictors which may interfere with candidate traits: demographics (age, gender, and education)³, ideology (1 = *right*; 10 = *left*), and economy evaluation (1 = *much worse*, 5 = *much better*). In Step 2, we tested the main effects of the incumbent and the challenger traits, along with early (= 1) versus late decision (= 0) and political sophistication. All control and main effect variables were z standardized (see Aiken & West, 1991). In Step 3, all two-way interaction terms were entered (Decision Time \times Incumbent Traits, Decision Time \times Challenger Traits, Political Sophistication \times Incumbent Traits, Political Sophistication \times Challenger Traits). The size and the direction of these interaction terms' coefficients were interpreted as indicators of whether the effects of incumbent and challenger traits as main effect variables varied according to early versus late voting decision and to the degree of

³ We constructed three dummy variables for levels of education: primary school, high school, university degree (omitted as the reference group).

Table 1. Hierarchical Logistic Regressions: Control Variables, Main Variables, and Interactions as Predictors of Voting Choice in Early and Late Deciders

	Entire Sample		Early Deciders		Late Deciders	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Step 1						
Control Variables						
Age	.12	.15	.30	.22	.02	.22
Gender	.17	.27	-.06	.40	.40	.49
Primary School	-.39	.51	-.62	.69	-.29	.86
High School	-.16	.50	-.42	.66	-.03	.85
Ideology	2.93***	.24	3.34***	.33	2.05**	.37
Economy Evaluation	-.32*	.14	-.53**	.20	.06	.23
Step 2						
Main Variables						
Incumbent Traits	-1.27***	.23	-1.34***	.33	-1.03**	.34
Challenger Traits	.70***	.20	.85**	.31	.44	.28
Political Sophistication	-.08	.23	.11	.37	-.34	.32
Decision Time	-.20	.33				
Step 3						
Two-way Interactions						
Sophistication × Incumbent	-.28	.44	-.38	.32	.85*	.43
Sophistication × Challenger	.30	.38	.73*	.36	.39	.86
Decision × Incumbent	-.19	.32				
Decision × Challenger	.54*	.32				
Step 4						
Three-way Interactions						
Decision × Sophistication × Incumbent	-.56*	.29				
Decision × Sophistication × Challenger	.55*	.28				
Nagelkerke's Pseudo- R^2		.802		.887		.488

Source: ITANES 2006.

Note: Voting choice was coded as 0 = Vote for the center-right coalition, 1 = Vote for the center-left coalition. Entire sample $N = 1056$, early deciders $N = 823$, late deciders $N = 233$.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Significant main and interaction effects are reported in bold.

political sophistication. Finally, in Step 4 the two three-way interaction terms were entered (Decision Time × Political Sophistication × Incumbent Traits, Decision Time × Political Sophistication × Challenger Traits), testing whether the effects of the two candidates' traits were moderated simultaneously by voting decision time and voter's political sophistication.

Table 1 shows the results of this analysis. First, in Step 1 ideology had a very strong impact on the voting decision ($B = 2.93$; $p < .001$). Economy evaluation also had a significant (although much lower) impact on the voting decision ($B = -.32$; $p < .05$), showing an economic voting effect: those who found that the national economic conditions had worsened had a higher probability to vote for the challenging left-wing coalition. None of the demographic variables had a significant influence on vote. Overall, control variables in Step 1 dramatically improved the predictive power of the model ($\Delta\chi^2(6df) = 498.05$, $p < .001$), accounting for 74.1% of the variance in voting choice.⁴ However, adding the main variables in Step 2 also significantly improved prediction ($\Delta\chi^2(4df) = 55.62$, $p < .001$), accounting for 5.2% of the variance. This result was consistent with our Hypothesis 1 according to which candidate traits would still influence voting choice even in the presence of a strong influence of ideology.

⁴ The Nagelkerke R^2 , ranging from 0 to 1, was considered as goodness of fit index for this and the following logistic regressions.

As can be seen in Table 1, both incumbent ($B = -1.27, p < .001$) and challenger traits ($B = .70, p < .001$) significantly influenced the vote, although the influence of the incumbent traits was much stronger. This offered a confirmation of our Hypothesis 2 of an incumbency effect in the overall sample, even after controlling for the economic voting effect. Neither political sophistication ($B = -.08, p = .72$) nor decision time ($B = -.20, p = .54$), taken in isolation, had a significant impact on vote.

Entering the two-way interactions in Step 3 further improved the predictive power of the model ($\Delta\chi^2(4df) = 5.35, p < .05$; accounted variance 4%) showing that the Decision Time \times Challenger Traits interaction was significant ($B = .54, p < .05$). Finally, Step 4 further improved the prediction of our model ($\Delta\chi^2(2df) = 6.56, p < .05$, accounted variance 5%), showing that both the three-way interactions had a significant influence on voting decision (Decision Time \times Political Sophistication \times Incumbent Traits, $B = -.56, p < .05$; Decision Time \times Political Sophistication \times Challenger Traits, $B = .55, p < .05$). Hence, the impact on vote of the incumbent and the challenger traits varied according to both decision time and political sophistication. The full model accounted for 80.2% of the variance in the actual vote of the respondents and permitted a correct classification of 92.5% of the whole sample.

To interpret the two- and three-way significant interactions and to test our Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 4 regarding the moderating effect of decision time and political sophistication on the relationship between candidate traits and voting choice, we conducted separate regression analyses for the subsamples of early and late deciders (see Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). In each analysis, actual vote was regressed on control variables in Step 1, on main effect variables in Step 2, and on the two interaction terms Political Sophistication \times Incumbent Traits and Political Sophistication \times Challenger Traits in Step 3. The results of these analyses are reported in the center and right columns of Table 1 and show different patterns in the voting decision of early and late deciders.

Control variables in Step 1 improved the predictive power of the model in both groups, even if the addition was significantly stronger for early deciders ($\Delta\chi^2(6df) = 458.43, p < .001$; accounted variance 83.8%) than for late deciders ($\Delta\chi^2(6df) = 35.92, p < .001$; accounted variance 23.5%). Regression coefficients show that ideology weighed much more in the voting choice of early deciders ($B = 3.34, p < .001$) than in the one of late deciders ($B = 2.05, p < .01$). Besides, economy evaluation had a significant influence for early deciders ($B = -.53, p < .01$), but not for late deciders ($B = .06, p = .79$).

The addition of candidate traits in Step 2 significantly increased the explanatory power of the model for both groups of voters. In this case, the increase was greater for late deciders ($\Delta\chi^2(3df) = 37.82, p < .001$; accounted variance 22.7%) than for early deciders ($\Delta\chi^2(3df) = 39.91, p < .001$; accounted variance 4.1%). However, regression coefficients show that while for early deciders the influence on the vote was significant for both the incumbent traits ($B = -1.34, p < .001$) and the challenger traits ($B = .85, p < .01$), for late deciders the influence was significant for the incumbent traits ($B = -1.03, p < .01$), but not for the challenger traits ($B = .44, p = .19$). This result was consistent with our Hypothesis 3, according to which challenger traits would have mattered more for the voting choice of early deciders than for the voting choice of late deciders.

The addition of the interaction terms in Step 3 also led to a significant increase in the amount of variance explained in both groups (early deciders: $\Delta\chi^2(2df) = 5.73, p < .05$, accounted variance 8%; late deciders: $\Delta\chi^2(2df) = 5.33, p < .05$; accounted variance 16%). However, while for early deciders only the interaction Political Sophistication \times Challenger Traits significantly predicted voting choice ($B = .73, p < .05$), for late deciders only the interaction Political Sophistication \times Incumbent Traits significantly predicted voting choice ($B = .85, p < .05$). In the case of early deciders test for simple slopes revealed that the effect of challenger traits on voting choice was greater for those who had a higher level of political sophistication. Conversely, in the case of late deciders test for simple slopes revealed that the effect of incumbent traits on voting choice was greater for those who had a lower level of political sophistication.

These results are consistent with our Hypothesis 4, regarding moderating effect of sophistication on the influence that the two candidates' traits would have on the voting choice of early and late deciders. As expected, the traits of the challenger had more influence on the voting choice of early deciders who were more sophisticated, while the traits of the incumbent had more influence on the voting choice of late deciders who were less sophisticated.

The full equation including control variables, main variables, and interactions explained 88.7% of variance in voting of early deciders, permitting the correct classification of 93.4% of these voters, while for late deciders the variance accounted by the full equation was 46.2%, permitting the correct classification of 67% of these voters.

Discussion

Taking advantage of pre- and post-election data representing a significant survey pool of voters, the current research allowed us to assess, for the first time, the influence of the incumbent and challenger personality traits on the voting choice of early and late deciders. We showed that candidate traits have an impact on the vote of both categories of voters, even considering the influence of other vote predictors such as ideology and economy evaluation. However, we also showed that while for late deciders only the incumbent traits have a significant influence on voting choice, for early deciders there is also a strong influence of the challenger traits. Finally, we found that the degree of political sophistication further enhances the difference between early and late deciders. Late deciders who are less sophisticated give even more weight to the incumbent traits, while early deciders who are more sophisticated give even more weight to the challenger traits. These results extend previous research on how the candidate influences the voting choice of different categories of voters (Gidengil, 2003; Glass, 1985).

First, our data contribute to clarify the relative impact of candidates and ideology on vote. In our research, ideology had a strong influence on the voting choice of both early and late deciders, although for late deciders the influence was less marked than for early deciders. Anyhow, in both groups candidate traits have added explanatory power to the model's prediction of the vote. Thus, as has been suggested (Redlawsk & Lau, 1995), the influence on vote of a factor which is apparently more "superficial" and linked to the electoral context as the candidates' traits, can go hand in hand with the influence of a "deep" and stable factor as ideology. This is especially likely when one considers that in contemporary political communication information regarding the candidates often prevails over other information (e.g., political issues or programs; Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004; Delli-Carpini, Huddy, & Shapiro, 1996; Kerkhof, 1999; Popkin, 1991). It is therefore not surprising that both early and late deciders pay closer attention to such information. That once said, our data also showed that for early deciders, ideology is a strong predictor of their vote, and that the addition of candidate traits increases the explanatory power of the voting model less than what occurs for late deciders. For late deciders, ideology is a less strong vote predictor, and the addition of candidate traits improves the model's explanation of the vote in a relevant measure, so that for this group of voters candidate traits have an influence on the vote about equal to that of ideology. Probably, early deciders incorporate candidate information with other structured information available to memory, particularly that which is organized around ideological principles. Late deciders instead rely to a greater extent on the mere perception of candidate traits free from ideology.

Second, our data demonstrated that in assessing how much the candidates' personality traits matter in the voting choice of different categories of voters it is important to bear in mind the distinction between the incumbent traits and the challenger traits. In our research, there was a general trend for voters to base their choice on the incumbent more than the challenger, even considering the impact of economy evaluation. This confirmed empirically the hypothesis that the incumbency effect is not only a phenomenon linked to economic voting, that is, the tendency to give more weight to the

assessment of the incumbent when the economic situation is perceived as worse than in the past. The incumbency effect seems to be rather a more general phenomenon (see Weisberg, 2002), probably due to a greater availability of information about the incumbent and to a simplification of voting decision. As attention is focused on the best-known and familiar candidate, less familiar candidates are removed from the decision-making environment, eliminating the need to consider new and complex information (Lau, 2001).

Third, for the first time our data have also shown that the influence of the incumbent's versus challenger's personality traits on the voting choice varies according to both voting decision time and voter's political sophistication. We found that the incumbency effect is more pronounced in late deciders who are less sophisticated. Instead, early deciders base their voting decision relatively more on the challenger's traits and this tendency appears more marked for early deciders who are more sophisticated.

Therefore, the current research extends earlier work on how much the candidate matters in the voting choice of different categories of voters, by demonstrating the importance of taking into account the distinction between incumbent and challenger traits, as well as voting decision time and voter's political sophistication. Future research could further investigate these issues, for example, the extent to which contextual factors (e.g., years of incumbency, years of political activity of the challenger) may affect the relative weight early or late deciders assign to the traits of the incumbent or those of the challenger. It would also be useful to have more numerous panel research data including information about the time of voting decision. This would allow to further investigate whether the relationship between time of voting decision and political sophistication varies depending on factors related to the specific election, and whether this conditions the impact candidates have on the voting choice of early and late deciders.

However, we note in conclusion that the candidates' traits, as they have been measured in our research, proved to be a very good predictor of the vote for both early and late deciders. For late deciders, the addition of the candidates' traits to the prediction model significantly increased its explanatory power, enough to explain 46.2% of the variance in the vote. This result bodes well for the possibility to predict the voting choice of late deciders, a class of voters that has been described as "elusive" but whose increasing importance for the elections' results is clear.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research and its publication were funded by the Italian Council of University Research and the Catholic University of Milan. We would like to thank David Redlawsk and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on the first version of the article. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Patrizia Catellani, Department of Psychology, Catholic University of Milan, Largo Gemelli, 1, I-20123 Milan, Italy. E-mail: patrizia.catellani@unicatt.it

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