

# Voters show paradoxical views of political mavericks

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Republican Senator John McCain has staked his bid for the U.S. presidency on his reputation as a “political maverick,” a politician who is unafraid to cross party lines to “vote his conscience” on important policy issues. By doing so, he places the electorate in a complicated emotional tug-of-war, according to a new study by UC Irvine psychology professor Peter Ditto and graduate student Andrew Mastronarde.

Political mavericks inspire conflicting feelings among voters, a finding Ditto said could change the way politicians conduct campaigns and cultivate public images. The study appears online in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

“People have been hard-wired through evolution to care about trustworthiness,” Ditto said. “We are social animals who have always had to rely on cooperation with others to survive. When a person acts contrary to his own self-interest, such as challenging his own group when towing the party line would be to his advantage, it is a powerful signal of trustworthiness. We respond viscerally to that person as someone who has integrity and is honorable – traits we find very attractive in political leaders.”

At the same time, people also are hard-wired to like others who agree with them, and the defining feature of maverick politicians is the tendency to disagree with their own group on important issues. Thus, while maverick politicians often gain respect from those who hold

opposing views, they can expect to experience significant backlash from members of their own political party.

“Basically, when people evaluate a maverick politician, they are stuck in a kind of 'affective crossfire,’” Ditto said. “This is particularly true when mavericks are members of our own political party. We like them because they show a key sign of trustworthiness but we dislike them because they disagree with us.”

The study showed that candidates could best use their maverick reputation as a political asset by shifting public focus away from specific policy issues to general issues of character.

“When people focus on issues of character, they like mavericks. But when they are focused more on issues, the influence is negative,” Ditto said. He cited the case of McCain campaign manager Rick Davis, who recently stated that the 2008 presidential election was “not about issues” but “about a composite view of what people take away from these candidates.”

From the other perspective, the campaign of Democratic contender Barack Obama should be trying to focus on issues as a way of neutralizing McCain’s maverick appeal – a strategy they have been sticking to rigidly with apparent success, Ditto says.

The research is a composite of three separate studies conducted by Ditto and Mastrorarde to gauge public attitudes about political mavericks. In the first study, participants expressed more positive views of political mavericks described generally than when prompted to consider a maverick from their own political party. The second study found that political mavericks described in character terms were evaluated more favorably than party-line politicians, even when the maverick was of the participant’s own party. The final study found that when participants

were provided with specific policy stances, opposing party mavericks were evaluated more positively and same party mavericks were evaluated more negatively, than were their party-line counterparts.

The studies examined a wide range of individuals including undergraduates from UCI, shoppers at a local outdoor mall, and several thousand adult U.S. citizens who visited the Web site [www.yourmorals.org](http://www.yourmorals.org) to complete various questionnaires concerning political decisions and attitudes.

Provided by University of California, Irvine

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