

Voting for a candidate is not about policy or experience -- it's about charisma, researchers find

October 30 2008, By George Lowery

(PhysOrg.com) -- In a matter of seconds, voters can decide -- based on their perception of a candidate's charisma -- which of two candidates will win a race. About 60 percent of the time, they are correct, according to a new study.

Researchers assembled 264 volunteers who watched 10-second silent video clips from debates between gubernatorial candidates unknown to the viewers. The volunteers then made a series of judgments about the candidates' likeability, leadership qualities, party affiliation and which candidate they thought would win.

The volunteers were "remarkably accurate in getting it right about 60 percent of the time, which is strongly statistically significant," said Daniel J. Benjamin, an assistant professor of economics at Cornell whose study, co-authored with the University of Chicago's Jesse M. Shapiro, will be published in a future issue of *The Review of Economics and Statistics*.

"It's a gut feeling based on the clips," Benjamin said. "What we were getting from subjects' ratings of these 10 seconds is some measure of the charisma that these candidates exude, and I think in elections undecided voters choose based on these kinds of factors."

Although loyal Democrats or Republicans tend to vote for their own

party's candidate, people who are undecided make their decision based on something else. "I think a big part of that something else is the perception of charisma, which we're measuring," Benjamin said.

Benjamin is a behavioral economist, a branch of economics that draws on psychology and originated at Cornell in the 1980s with the work of Richard Thaler, now at the University of Chicago and a consultant to the Obama campaign.

"What's novel about what we did was to introduce methodology from psychology to measure the relative charisma of the candidates, and also we measured how important charisma was relative to other factors normally studied by economists and political scientists," said Benjamin.

In his work at Cornell, Benjamin collaborates with economists and psychologists in the College of Arts and Sciences, the Johnson School, the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and the College of Human Ecology.

The title of Benjamin's paper, "Thin-Slice Forecasts of Gubernatorial Elections," refers to a body of literature in psychology about using the "thin slice" technique of using short video clips to measure snap judgments about the person in the clip. This research -- summarized in Malcolm Gladwell's 2005 book "Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking" -- has demonstrated that students who watch a few seconds of video of a teacher can predict his or her end-of-semester evaluations, and people who listen to a few seconds of doctors talking to patients can predict who will be sued for malpractice.

Provided by Cornell University

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