

Research examines key qualities that voters expect in their presidential candidates

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What are the key characteristics that voters consider when they're choosing their candidate for president? New research led by Judith Trent, a professor of communication at the University of Cincinnati, yields some surprising findings from surveys from the 2008 primary campaign in New Hampshire – a historic campaign in itself because of the diverse demographic characteristics of some of the leading contenders. The top ideal quality picks are a candidate's honesty and willingness to talk about the challenges affecting the nation.

The article, titled, "Cracked and Shattered Ceilings: Gender, Race, Religion, Age, and the Ideal Candidate," is published this month in the scholarly journal, *American Behavioral Scientist*.

Trent has collected voter opinion at the New Hampshire Primary political rallies for two decades, starting when George Bush Sr. defeated Michael Dukakis in 1988.

The UC researchers examine presidential campaign communication, the qualities or attributes that voters want in a [president](#), and they explore whether these views shift over time.

Because of the historic diversity of the 2008 presidential campaign, the researchers added a series of questions examining voter opinion on demographic variables including race, gender, age and religion. Previous surveys had found that men emphasized the importance of a political candidate being male, yet Hillary Clinton won the primary in 2008.

The people surveyed in 2008 felt that the three most important qualities of the candidates were honesty, talking about the nation's problems and being compassionate about people's needs. "Honesty has always ranked very high in this longitudinal study, yet it's hard for respondents to assess or measure," write the authors.

The researchers add that they were also interested in what voters found to be less important characteristics in the 2008 New Hampshire Primary, including service in the military, talking about religious beliefs or other unique demographic variables such as race, gender or age. However, the New Hampshire Primary ended with Democrats selecting the female candidate (Hillary Clinton) and Republicans selecting the oldest candidate (John McCain).

The 2008 survey was completed by 817 people, with a total response from the two decades of surveys reaching 2,704. In the 2008 sample, 40 percent of the people surveyed identified as Independent [voters](#), the highest percentage of Independents since the study has been underway.

Also, despite media attention surrounding the youth vote in 2008, the number of respondents age 18-34 declined from 174 in the 2004 survey to 120 in 2008. Questionnaires were distributed at more than a dozen separate political rallies or events.

The 2008 survey had higher numbers of women respondents (426 female; 323 male) as well as higher numbers of democratic respondents (299 Democrat; 151 Republican; 299 Independent).

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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