

# Self-presentation of the US presidential candidates in 2016 and 2020

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Politicians often mention their personality traits when communicating with the public that aligns with the concept of impression management (Benoit and McHale 2003). This suggests that politicians can use their personalities to create a favorable image during election campaigns (Van Santen and Van Zoonen 2010). However, previous research has not adequately incorporated personality theories into the study of impression management (Clifford 2018). Addressing this gap, our study examines how presidential candidates presented themselves during the 2016 and 2020 US elections, and explores the personality traits emphasized in campaign communication. Our research combines qualitative and quantitative methods and diverse data sources, including political commercials and speeches. This study contributes to the field by incorporating personality theories into the study of political impression management.

**Keywords:** self-presentation, US elections, impression management, personality, mixed methods, political communication

## 1. Introduction

As politics becomes more mediated and personalized, voters are increasingly forming opinions of politicians as individuals rather than solely as political figures (Van Aelst *et al.* 2012). Previous research has highlighted this shift in media attention from political parties to individual politicians, or personalization (Adam and Maier 2010; Van Aelst *et al.* 2012). As a result, politicians are placing greater emphasis on their personal lives during election campaigns, leading to an increase of personal information available to the public. This behavior can be understood as part of “political impression management” (De Landtsheer *et al.* 2008) and self-presentation (Schlenker 2012), which allow politicians to control the image they convey to voters and is further considered crucial for successful election campaigns among practitioners and academics.

Despite the importance of impression management in successful election campaigns, the connection between impression management and the personality traits that politicians emphasize in their rhetoric has received limited scholarly attention (Benoit and McHale 2003). This study addresses this gap by investigating the personality traits emphasized by presidential candidates in the 2016 and 2020 election campaigns, using a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative research with quantitative analysis.

Drawing on previous research on personality in politics and qualitative coding, we developed a framework of personality attributes emphasized by presidential candidates as part of impression management. Our research is innovative in its comprehensive analysis of two distinct election periods, 13 presidential candidates, four media formats, and comparisons between male and female candidates, as well as Republicans and Democrats. This approach enhances the validity of our findings and provides a more detailed understanding of the phenomenon of self-presentation in politics.

## 2. Literature review

Firstly, this article's theoretical section reviews the trend toward personalization in politics. Then, we delve deeper into the subject of political leaders' personalities. Finally, we discuss the growing significance of impression management in the context of personalization in politics.

### 2.1 Personalization in American politics

The trend of personalization in liberal democracies in recent decades (Costa and Ferreira 2015; Garzia *et al.* 2021) is characterized by a shift from judging politicians as public figures to focusing on them as individuals. This change is accompanied by a move away from parties towards individual politicians (Van Aelst *et al.* 2012) and can be attributed to various factors, including the commercialized and new media landscape (Brunnerova 2019). Additionally, the changing proportions in party politics and institutional composition, such as those found in presidential systems, may contribute to the trend (McGregor 2018).

Personalization is defined as a dual nature concept comprising individualization and privatization (Van Aelst *et al.* 2011). Individualization denotes a shift in attention from parties and institutions to individual politicians (Van Aelst *et al.* 2011; Van Santen and Van Zoonen 2009), while privatization refers to the increasing media focus on the private lives and personal characteristics of politicians (Brunnerova 2019). Politicians and voters adapt their behaviors accord-

ingly, particularly in presidential systems like the American model (Adam and Maier 2010; Kriesi 2011). This way, the media emphasizes politicians' private lives, and politicians add personal details to their communication (Van Santen and Van Zoonen 2010).

In response to the changing media landscape, politicians are adapting their communication strategies by tailoring their messages to the medium and its specific rules (Enli 2017). In a mediatized context (Strömbäck, Esser, and Lundby 2009), another adaptation also includes the rise of personalized communication driven by social media (Enli 2017), which allows politicians to present themselves in a more personal way departing from formal political presentations as well as providing politicians with an infrastructure to create, choose, and share content directly with citizens (Lalancette and Raynauld 2019). Obama's 2008 election victory is a landmark in the use of media during election campaigns (Bimber 2014).

The current phase of political communication is additionally characterized by an increase in anti-elitism and populism, and voters find themselves in a semi-private and semi-public environment where the boundaries between offline and online relationships are blurred (Enli and Skogerbø 2015). This shift towards personalization is also evident in political parties, resulting in a shift of power towards the leader (Balmas, Rahat, Sheaffer, and Shenhav 2012), who bypasses traditional party layers and communicates directly with voters through social media (Metz *et al.* 2020). Ultimately, this trend directs more power resources towards improving the leader's personal status rather than party affairs.

## 2.2 Impression management

### 2.2.1 *Impression management and self-presentation*

Impression management pertains to how individuals influence others' perceptions of them by manipulating the context to their advantage (Schütz 1998). This concept encompasses various techniques, including self-presentation. In organizational psychology, self-presentation specifically refers to using verbal statements to portray one's qualities to appeal to a particular audience (Kumar and Beyerlein 1991). Professionals such as politicians are highly cognizant of their self-presentation, especially given the growing personalization and mediatization of politics (De Landtsheer *et al.* 2008). Research has identified specific impression management tactics employed by individuals in such professions, including strategizing their public image and utilizing targeted communication methods (Schlenker 2012).

This study examines verbal impression management, which enables politicians to control the image they present to the public. This involves written and

spoken communication to create a specific image for the audience and construct a “frontstage persona”, as described by Goffman (1959). The frontstage persona is the personality that individuals display to the outside world in social settings such as interviews, speeches, and debates, while the backstage persona is kept hidden and expressed only in the absence of an audience. Sigelman’s (2001) research on former presidents Nixon and Johnson found that while their backstage personalities were markedly different, their frontstage personalities were more similar and converged into a presidential profile.

Furthermore, Schütz (1998) distinguishes between two types of intentions in impression management: the intention to avoid creating negative impressions and the intention to create positive impressions. Individuals rarely intentionally create negatively evaluated impressions, except when necessary to achieve long-term goals. When undesired effects occur, defensive self-presentation tactics can be used to reduce negative impact and either restore positive identity or remove negative perceptions. Politicians can employ various defensive strategies, according to Schütz (1995), such as shirking responsibility, taking responsibility and justifying behavior, or providing a different interpretation of an event by placing it in a different context or giving it a new name with a more positive connotation to restore their image.

### *2.2.2 Impression management and different types of media outlets*

Presidential candidates utilize social media, interviews, press conferences, and advertising, to present themselves in public “frontstage” settings. Press conferences, interviews, and debates during an election campaign are typically semi-spontaneous in nature. The context for these events is often predefined, both in terms of the location and the questions or topics, combining planned and spontaneous features, as candidates can offer their input to unexpected questions (Yi 2016). Politicians commonly use TV interviews as a means of self-presentation sharing personal information to gain public approval, as observed by Schütz (1995).

Secondly, political advertising is disseminated through various communication channels, including social media and television. Television advertising has traditionally been deemed the most effective means of reaching voters, as per the study by Benoit and McHale (2003). It serves as a supplementary tool for reaching voters who do not actively seek information on politicians via interviews, press conferences, and debates. Presidential candidates are more inclined to present themselves in commercials compared to other formats, such as debates, according to Benoit (1999).

In addition, politicians have increasingly recognized the importance of social media as a communication tool in recent years. Previous studies have shown

social media's effectiveness in mobilizing support and creating a relatable image of politicians (Lalancette and Raynauld 2019; Jung *et al.* 2017), fundraising, and shaping political discourse in the campaigns of Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 and Donald Trump in 2016 (Bimber 2014). Twitter has attracted specific interest of researchers (Bhattacharya *et al.* 2016; Stier *et al.* 2018). There is evidence that Twitter provides an informal form of communication distinct from traditional media practices (Graham *et al.* 2018). This counteracts the premeditated nature of political campaigns. However, studies have conflicting results regarding discourse personalization on Twitter, with conversations often being centered on issue-based discussions and political proposals rather than personal lives (López-Meri *et al.* 2017). Furthermore, political candidates' communicative strategies on Twitter follow a hybrid logic (Alonso-Muñoz *et al.* 2016). They frequently refer to traditional media sources, employ hashtags and repropose other users' content. This creates a complex interactive environment with direct speech replaced by a hybrid mix of different media formats.

In conclusion, politicians utilize various media for impression management, with social media becoming increasingly prominent in recent years (Rossini *et al.* 2017), offering greater autonomy for candidates (Wells *et al.* 2016). However, political advertising remains a significant portion of campaign funding due to its broad reach and cross-platform usability (Katz 2016). Lastly, interviews, press conferences, and debates, although less common (Wells *et al.* 2016), can have a significant impact on the electorate due to their personal and unscripted nature (Yi 2016).

### 2.3 Personality of the political leader

We shall now examine the attributes to which political actors refer in verbal impression management (Schütz 1998). The notion of personality forms the foundation for further exploring personality traits in political self-presentation. This study adopts Huddy *et al.*'s (2013, 8) definition of personality as “a collection of relatively persistent individual differences that transcend specific situations and contribute to the observed stability of attitudes and behavior.” Furthermore, Winter (2013) suggests that personality attributes can be enabled and emphasized, depending on the situation. The subsequent sections begin by delineating salient personality frameworks, and examining the findings on the personality of political leaders. Finally, we discuss the connection between personality, gender, and ideological preferences.

### 2.3.1 Personality frameworks

Numerous methods exist for categorizing “personality” into factors or facets. This section examines such frameworks as The Big Five Model, HEXACO, Dark Triad, and Millon Inventory of Diagnostic Criteria (MIDC).

The Five Factor Model, also known as The Big Five, defines personality in terms of five factors: extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience (Lee and Ashton 2004). Judge and Bono (2000) contend that extroversion encompasses, among other things, assertiveness, a predisposition for excitement, and positive emotions. Agreeableness relates to altruism, compliance, and warmth. Conscientiousness focuses on performance and reliability. Neuroticism pertains to anxiety, depression, and moodiness. Finally, openness to experience refers to creativity, imagination, mindfulness, and attentiveness. This model is widely employed in the social sciences and has gained more significance in political psychology research (Joly, Soroka, and Loewen 2019). Furthermore, the HEXACO model adds an extra layer to the Five Factor Model, known as “honesty-modesty.” This factor pertains to issues concerning morality and social values. This novel factor is evaluated by considering reasonableness, sincerity, and modesty and is only partly represented in the Five Factor Model (Lee and Ashton 2004).

Scholars have recently shown an increased interest in personality types that display socially undesirable traits, referred to as the Dark Triad framework, which includes psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and narcissism (Hodson, Hogg, and MacInnis 2009). Psychopathy is characterized by impulsivity, emotional detachment, manipulative behavior, a lack of empathy, and absence of remorse (Paulhus and Williams 2002; Vernon *et al.* 2008). Machiavellianism involves manipulative behavior, exploitation of others, a cunning and cold personality, insincerity, and low modesty (Hodson *et al.* 2009). Narcissistic individuals display an inflated sense of self-worth, attention-seeking tendencies, and a desire for dominance (Vernon *et al.* 2008).

Finally, we discuss the Millon Inventory of Diagnostic Criteria (MIDC), a theoretical framework and measuring instrument developed by Immelman (1998) that comprises twelve personality scales that describe personality patterns, including dominance, dauntlessness, ambition, extroversion, accommodating pattern, aggrieved pattern, conscientiousness, contentious, reticent, and retiring patterns (Millon 1992, 1994). The MIDC model overlaps with established concepts in political psychology, such as cognitive and motivational dispositions, personal and social orientations, and is aligned with clinical practice models (Immelman 2005; Millon 1994) (as summarized in Table 1).

**Table 1.** Millon Inventory of Diagnostic Criteria (MIDC) patterns and prototypical features

MIDC patterns	Prototypical features
dominant	strong-willed, commanding, assertive, competitive, opinionated
dauntless	adventurous, individualistic, venturesome, nonconformist
ambitious	confident, socially poised, self-promoting
outgoing	warm, congenial, sociable, gregarious
accommodating	devoted, cooperative, compliant, agreeable
aggrieved	humble, unpretentious, deferential
contentious	cynical, headstrong, resolute
conscientious	earnest, polite, dutiful, dependable, principled
reticent	watchful, private, socially reserved, circumspect
retiring	self-contained, unsociable, reserved, solitary

*Note.* This overview relies on descriptions of each pattern in their normal, well-adjusted variants. The descriptions of maladaptive variants are not included. Similarly, this overview excludes the Erratic and Distrusting patterns. These patterns conceptually constitute a decompensated, structurally defective extension of normal patterns (Immelman 1998), and therefore we do not expect them to be relevant for the study of self-presentation.

The above frameworks have been widely used in political personality research. The next section discusses a few specific cases where these frameworks are applied to political success research.

### 2.3.2 *Personality and political success*

Research suggests that positive character traits in politicians may not always lead to positive evaluations by the public. According to Joly, Soroka, and Loewen (2019), politicians who exhibit less agreeable personalities are more likely to receive preferential votes, have longer political careers, and achieve elite status, suggesting that those with more pleasant personalities were more docile or easy to manipulate. Rubenzer *et al.* (2000) found that US presidents were generally less agreeable, more extroverted, and less open to experiences than the average American, and scored high on achievement, assertiveness, and emotionality, but low on values, sincerity, and modesty. Lilienfeld *et al.* (2012) concluded that fearless dominance is associated with successful presidential performance, while Deluga (2001) found that Machiavellianism and charismatic leadership are positively associated with public trust. Finally, grandiose narcissism is more prevalent among American presidents and is linked to indicators of both successful and negative presidential performance, particularly in ethics (Watts *et al.*, 2013).

### 2.3.3 *Personality and ideology*

Political personality research in the United States has explored potential differences between Democratic and Republican politicians. Graham, Haidt, and Nosek (2009) found that liberals prioritize „Care” and „Fairness/reciprocity” categories more than conservatives, who use the five categories more evenly. Stereotypical character traits associated with each party have also been investigated. Democrats are commonly viewed as more compassionate and honest, while Republicans are typically perceived as possessing stronger moral principles and being more respectful and effective leaders (Clifford 2019; Hayes 2005). However, studies have found that Democrats may also be associated with indecision and weakness, while Republicans may be associated with a lack of empathy and selfishness (Winter 2010). Carney *et al.* (2008) found that liberals scored higher on openness, while conservatives scored higher on conscientiousness using the Big Five framework.

### 2.3.4 *Personality and gender differences*

Gender stereotypes shape how leaders are perceived and evaluated, with women often viewed as compassionate and communicative and men as competitive and assertive. Consequently, women are expected to focus on social issues while men are deemed better equipped to handle international relations and military matters (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). Research indicates that both men and women prefer male managers due to negative perceptions of women rather than positive perceptions of men (Balgui 2013). Gender also tends to align with political affiliation, with women more likely to be seen as liberal and men as conservative. However, recent studies show a more nuanced picture with fewer gender stereotypes. In contemporary politics, self-presentation can be used to challenge gender stereotypes (Devroe, 2020). For example, male politicians may use words with connotations that contradict their gender to present themselves as suitable for issues typically associated with female politicians, while female politicians may present themselves as determined and strong (Hayes 2011).

## 3. **Problem definition**

Modern political campaigns often focus on personal characteristics and language use rather than substantive arguments (Joly *et al.* 2019; Garzia *et al.* 2021), which is associated with the personalization of politics (Van Aelst *et al.* 2011; Van Santen and Van Zoonen 2009; Kriesi 2011). This way, studies indicate that politicians



devote much of their electoral discourse to presenting their personal image (Benoit and McHale 2003).

Research shows that the public and media pay significant attention to the private lives and personalities of politicians, who also strategically use their personal characteristics to build a public persona that aligns with public expectations (Schütz 1998). However, the connection between personality research and impression management is still mostly unexplored (Benoit and McHale 2003; Clifford 2018). This study aims to address this gap by drawing on personality theories, self-presentation, and impression management as theoretical frameworks, with a focus on campaign discourse during the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections to investigate the personality attributes that candidates use to present themselves (McGregor 2018; Schütz 1995). Our research question is therefore as follows:

**RQ1.** What personality attributes do presidential candidates discuss in their election campaign (2016 and 2020) communication?

We define personality attributes as the relatively enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings and behavior that distinguish individuals from one another (Allport 1961). As part of self-presentation, these attributes can be expressed implicitly or explicitly. For example, empathy can be presented implicitly by telling anecdotes that display the ability to empathize or explicitly by simply claiming to be empathetic.

**RQ2.** What differences are there in the personality attributes presidential candidates use to describe themselves in commercials and speeches?

We assume that how politicians present themselves to their audiences depends on the context of the speech. We compare political advertisements and speeches. Research by Savigny (2004) shows that the US has a highly developed advertising culture wherein large parts of the campaign budget are spent on TV commercials. Commercials offer politicians a platform where they can present themselves in a fully controlled manner and contain the most explicit uninterrupted self-presentation (Benoit and McHale 2003). In interviews, people usually focus on maintaining a “positive face” to gain approval from the public, but they have much less opportunity to decide for themselves what is and is not mentioned (Schütz 1998).

**RQ3.** What differences are there in the personality attributes that Democratic and Republican presidential candidates use to describe themselves in campaign communication?

According to prior research, there are distinct personality traits that the public associates with Democrats and Republicans. Specifically, Democrats are generally viewed as more honest and compassionate, while Republicans are often perceived as more patriotic, tough, and respectful (Clifford 2019).

**RQ4.** What different personality traits do female and male presidential candidates use to describe themselves in campaign communication?

As per reviewed research, gender-specific normative expectations can result in varied behaviors among women and men (Brandt and Laiho 2013). Furthermore, gender stereotypes also play a role in evaluating male and female leaders differently, and we anticipate observing such differences in this context.

#### **4. Method and data**

This research employed mixed methods, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. Initially, a qualitative thematic analysis was conducted on a small theoretical sample to identify diverse types of self-presentation using both inductive and deductive coding methods. The codes were generated inductively to capture thematic complexity and then compared to established theoretical categories, with additional categories created where necessary. The study also aimed to validate the themes quantitatively and determine their frequency, leading to a content analysis of a larger sample of data. The analysis involved examining speeches from 13 presidential candidates who obtained at least 1% of the popular vote in the 2016 and 2020 primaries. This resulted in the following list reviewed in Table 2.

The data analyzed for this study comprised of online video clips of public performances by US presidential candidates, including interviews, debates, speeches (including rallies), and commercials. The speeches were selected from both the Primaries and General Elections of the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections, representing a range of formats from spontaneous (interviews and debates) to non-spontaneous (commercials), with speeches being in between (Benoit and McHale 2003; Yi 2016).

To select sources for our dataset, we sought environments where candidates are inclined to refer to their personal traits. In this regard, commercials and debates have previously shown to be favorable for self-presentation (Benoit 1999).

**Table 2.** Candidates selected for analysis

<i>Republicans</i>	<i>Democrats</i>
Ted Cruz (2016)	Michael Bloomberg (2020)
Marco Rubio (2016)	Joe Biden (2020)
Donald Trump (2016 and 2020)	Bernie Sanders (2016 and 2020)
John Kasich (2016)	Hillary Clinton (2016)
Ben Carson (2016)	Elizabeth Warren (2020)
Bill Weld (2020)	Pete Buttigieg (2020)
	Amy Klobuchar (2020)

Interviews offer a broader scope for exploring personalities and constructing extensive narratives about individual traits, compared to shorter formats and hybrid landscape prevalent in social media (Alonso-Muñoz *et al.* 2016; Yi 2016). Both interviews and debates, with their semi-spontaneous nature, allow candidates segue into discussions that are more personal by blending planned elements with spontaneous responses (Yi 2016). Moreover, evidence suggests that discussions on for example Twitter primarily revolve around policy propositions with frequent repurposing of other users' content (Alonso-Muñoz *et al.* 2016; López-Meri *et al.* 2017). For the above reasons, our focus centers on interviews, debates, speeches, and commercials.

#### 4.1 Qualitative thematic analysis

To conduct the thematic analysis, we used criterion sampling to select media fragments of presidential candidates who received more than 1% of the popular vote in the primaries of 2016 or 2020. From this list, we chose fragments where candidates engage in self-presentation by using the first person "I" or "we" (Patton 1990). The study also employed theoretical sampling to supplement existing theories of self-presentation in presidential candidates using specifically selected data<sup>1</sup> merged into our own data file, which included verbatim transcripts and those retrieved from various online databases, such as C-Span.

The thematic analysis involved open, axial, and selective coding using NVivo to identify larger themes and definitive concepts, resulting in a codebook that formed the basis of our quantitative analysis and categories overview presented in Table 3 (Patton 1990; Glaser 1965). Overall, we obtained 24 fragments, including two debates, nine speeches, six commercials, and seven interviews for our analy-

1. C-span, The American Presidency Project, Political TV ad Archive and Rev, YouTube, Google

sis. We first developed codes from the data by labeling the presidential candidates' references to their personalities. Initially, we employed open coding to derive codes from the data and subsequently identified recurring themes in NVivo. Next, we organized the codes based on existing personality frameworks (like HEXACO and MIDC) and established additional categories emerging from the data. We ensured comprehensive and distinct descriptions of attributes, cross-checking with pre-existing categories for clarity and exclusivity (Glaser 1965). This iterative process involved restructuring, merging, and refining categories until we arrived at a finalized list. This can be illustrated briefly by categories 'Empathetic' and 'Honest' that first emerged from the data and were then aligned with the existing HEXACO categories. Empathetic self-presentation, as outlined in our codebook, involves portraying oneself as capable of understanding others' emotions and thoughts. The candidate assumes an emotional stance, expressing an inclination towards feelings, demonstrating compassion and sensitivity. Meanwhile, category 'Honest' entails the candidate presenting themselves as sincere and devoid of falsehoods or deceit, particularly regarding issues they endorse. We documented the outcome of the qualitative analysis in a codebook which formed the basis of our quantitative analysis.

#### 4.2 Quantitative analysis

Following the thematic analysis, we aimed to include the entire population of media formats in our analysis. We conducted keyword searches using online databases and search engines to identify relevant material, including presidential debates and commercials. We found an exhaustive list of debates on The American Presidency Project and corresponding debates on YouTube. We also searched for commercials on candidates' YouTube channels, C-Span, and Political TV ad Archive, resulting in a total population of 691 commercials.

However, due to feasibility concerns, we sampled speeches and interviews by selecting 1/3 of the calculated average hours per candidate and randomly selecting 4 hours of interviews per candidate. We coded 8,309 fragments of self-presentation in speeches, debates, commercials, and interviews during the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections using the SPSS statistical program. Twelve coders used a previously compiled codebook to identify and analyze fragments, and fragment properties were entered into an Excel file and coded according to the number of times a category appeared in a fragment.

### 4.3 Validity and reliability

The internal validity of the study was strengthened through theoretical and methodological triangulation. The research is based on different theoretical perspectives accounting for personalization, political psychology, leadership studies and impression management. In addition, the combination of a qualitative and quantitative methods ensures methodological triangulation (Mortelmans 2020).

To test inter-coder reliability, Krippendorff's alpha was used after double-coding the first 10% of data in a pilot test (Hayes and Krippendorff 2007). The codebook and definitions were revised, and a second inter-coder reliability test was performed on 5% of data, yielding 407 cases (Lombard, Snyder-Duch and Bracken 2002). Eight concepts reached a reliability score of 0.6 or higher, including patriotic ( $a = .7068$ ), identifiable ( $a = .6037$ ), polarizing ( $a = .7579$ ), empathy ( $a = .7345$ ), unifying ( $a = .7344$ ), honest ( $a = .7500$ ), humble ( $a = .7319$ ) and trustworthy ( $a = .6571$ ).<sup>2</sup>

Three of our concepts, dominant, competent, and confident, repeatedly scored low on inter-coder reliability. Hence, the "dominant" concept was excluded from our final analysis ( $a = .4932$ )<sup>3</sup> while competent and confident were merged due to content overlap and obtained a Kalpha of .7132.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Personality attributes in self-presentation (mixed methods)

Table 3 displays the list of concepts resulting from the thematic analysis, which were formulated using the HEXACO and MIDC personality frameworks (Lee and Ashton 2004; Immelman 1998). The table also indicates whether the concepts were derived from the data or an existing theory. Our quantitative analysis provides frequency information on personality attributes, which complements the qualitative analysis. Specifically, Table 3 summarizes the co-occurrence of personality attributes in the same fragment, while Table 4 displays the means and standard deviations of these attributes.

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2. After the pilot test, these variables obtained a Kalpha higher than .60: egalitarian ( $a = .6673$ ), anti-establishment ( $a = .7509$ ).

3. This concept also had a relatively low frequency of 392 mentions in our final sample of 8,309 fragments.

**Table 3.** Frequencies personality attributes

	N		N		Category origin (from data/theory)
	1 time	%	2 times or more	%	
competent/confident	2229	26.8	227	2.6	data / MIDC
enterprising	1553	18.7	21	0.2	data
relatable	1282	15.4	20	0.2	data
uniting	1077	13.0	13	0.2	data
reliable	649	7.8	21	0.3	data
empathetic	610	7.3	4	<0.1	HEXACO
humble	563	6.8	10	0.1	HEXACO
egalitarian	533	6.4	4	<0.1	data
patriotic	465	5.6	5	<0.1	data
anti-establishment	458	5.5	1	<0.1	data
honest	286	3.4	1	<0.1	HEXACO

*Note.* Total  $N=8,309$  fragments

**Table 4.** Descriptive statistics for personality attributes

	N	Max.	Mean	Std.Deviation
competent/confident	8309	5	0.33	0.537
enterprising	8309	4	0.19	0.406
relatable	8309	2	0.16	0.372
uniting	8309	2	0.13	0.344
reliable	8309	2	0.08	0.285
empathetic	8309	2	0.07	0.264
humble	8309	3	0.07	0.262
egalitarian	8309	2	0.07	0.249
patriotic	8309	3	0.06	0.236
anti-establishment	8309	2	0.06	0.229
honest	8309	2	0.03	0.184

### *Competent/confident*<sup>4</sup>

The most frequently used attribute in our sample was “competent and confident”, mentioned in 29.3% of fragments. The concept combines the belief in one’s ability to win the election (confidence) with the emphasis on concrete actions the candidate will take during their presidency (competence). This merged concept arises from both data and existing theory (MIDC, Immelman 1998).

That’s how you win an election in America, and that’s the path I’m on.

(Amy Klobuchar, Senator Amy Klobuchar on Real Time with Bill Maher, 12 October 2019)

Candidates emphasized both professional and personal attributes, such as management positions held in the past and leadership qualities, and regularly referred to their experience and knowledge within and beyond politics to demonstrate their capability to perform presidential duties:

I’m the only person that’s beaten the NRA nationally. I’m the guy that got the Brady bill passed, the background checks, number one. [...] I’m also the only guy that got assault weapons banned and the number of clips in a gun banned.

(Joe Biden, 1B First Democratic Primary Debate 2020, 27 June 2019)

### *Enterprising*

This personality attribute was found in 18.7% of the fragments. Enterprising presidential candidates demonstrate a proactive and results-driven approach, with a strong sense of initiative, determination, and perseverance. They are decisive problem-solvers, as exemplified by Marco Rubio’s statement which highlights his own and America’s fighting spirit.

We’re going to show you how firm and resolute we are. We take action, we don’t just talk.

(Marco goes on the record to discuss the crisis in Syria, 13 October 2015)

### *Relatable*

This concept occurred in 15.6% of the data. It refers to the candidate’s ability to establish a common identity with the target group to enhance their positive assessment and perceived suitability (Schütz 1998). Candidates achieve this by

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4. After a post-test of inter-coder reliability (Krippendorff’s Alpha), the separate concept ‘Competent’ was found to have a low score of .5605. Since this difference emerged from the theoretical similarities to the concept ‘Confident’, which also had a low Kalpha (.5679), these two concepts were merged with a resulting Kalpha of .7132.

referring to shared characteristics or experiences with the target group to create a sense of recognizability.

I knew what I wanted to be since I was in second grade, a schoolteacher. Can we hear it for America's public-school teachers?

(Elizabeth Warren, Senator Elizabeth Warren in Derry, New Hampshire, 6 February 2020)

Here, presidential candidate Warren refers to her experience as a teacher, then addresses this target audience to bond with them. In this way, the candidates say, "I am like you" or "I understand you" and thus present themselves as the closest representative of that group.

### *Uniting*

This attribute was mentioned in 13.2% of fragments. Here politicians would promote togetherness among diverse groups, such as political parties (Krishnamurthy 2013), in response to unfavorable situations, such as injustice or social vulnerability. Politicians who prioritize unification emphasize the importance of cooperation despite differences, and the benefits of policies that consider both majority and minority interests. The following quote exemplifies this concept:

This is our chance, to make this country, not just work for a thin slice at the top but to make it work for everybody.

(Elizabeth Warren, Switched interview, 6 July 2019)

### *Reliable*

This personality attribute occurs in 8.1% of the fragments. This attribute pertains to the perception of candidates as trustworthy and exhibiting correct conduct. Candidates may explicitly assert their trustworthiness or demonstrate ethical behavior through their actions. Consistency between their statements and actions also contributes to their perceived reliability. As an example, the following quote by Donald Trump illustrates this attribute.

We have to do a great job. And I promise you that I will not let you down. We will do a great job. We will do a great job!

(Presidential Candidate Donald Trump Victory Speech, 9 November 2016)

### *Empathetic*

References to empathy occurred in 7.3% of the fragments. Candidates demonstrate a deep understanding of the emotions and thoughts of others (Ashton *et al.* 2014). By adopting a sympathetic attitude and displaying compassion towards others, candidates present themselves as more relatable to voters. The following quote



from Hillary Clinton, a Democratic presidential candidate, illustrates this concept by emphasizing her recognition of people's vulnerable situations and her ability to empathize with them:

My heart broke for this young woman because she's gonna be paying that back until she's a grandmother. And that is just so wrong.

(Hillary Clinton Rally in Durham New Hampshire, 28 September 2016)

### *Humble*

This category was endorsed in 6.8% of the fragments, originating from our data and partly relying on the HEXACO model. Presidential candidates emphasize their lack of excessive self-regard and present themselves as ordinary individuals with imperfections. They often express disbelief at their achievements and attribute their success entirely to external factors, while also emphasizing gratitude and acknowledging others' contributions. The following quote from presidential candidate Bernie Sanders illustrates this attribute:

I will tell you where I am proud of, I sincerely am. And I don't credit myself for doing this alone. a lot of people were involved.

(Bernie Sanders talks about what his "Medicare for All" plan will do, 10 April 2019)

### *Egalitarian*

This category was found in 6.8% of the fragments. Our qualitative analysis revealed that presidential candidates frequently expressed their support for the pursuit of equality. These expressions covered various themes, such as economic, gender, and racial equality, and related issues, without specific policy proposals aimed at achieving equality.

...opening the doors to opportunity for all Americans. No matter their race, their gender, who they love, no matter who or where they're from.

(Joe Biden Campaign Rally in Pittsburgh, 29 April 2019)

### *Patriotic*

Another quality we discern from the data is patriotism or in-group loyalty (Clifford 2018). References to this trait were found in 5.6% of the fragments. This refers to the candidate's affection for their country, fostering a sense of community with the voters. This trait is a widely shared political sentiment in the American context. Candidates highlight the power and success of the United States, show appreciation for the nation, and evoke nostalgia for American history, such as the founding fathers and the values on which the country was built (Clifford 2018; Arieli 2017; Domke and Greenwald 2011).

What a country we have, what an amazing country.

(John Kasich, Town Hall Meeting in Annapolis, 19 April 2016)

### *Anti-establishment*

This concept was mentioned in 5.5% of the fragments. It refers to the candidate's discontent with the status quo and traditional societal principles. This dissatisfaction reflects criticism of the abuse of power by long-term politicians, a desire for change in future problem-solving, and skepticism of nostalgic leadership. Some candidates criticize former and current leaders and accuse the media and economic elites of corrupt behavior and spreading falsehoods.

... But at the end of the day, the only way that real change takes place is when millions of people stand up, fight back, and say, „Enough is enough. We're gonna have a government that works for all of us, not just the few.,,

(Bernie Sanders announces 2020 run: Extended interview, 19 February 2019)

### *Honest*

This attribute was found only in 3.4% of the fragments. It indicates that the candidate aims to appear sincere and transparent. This concept is distinct from „reliable,” as it pertains to truth-telling and transparency rather than ethical behavior. It draws from both our data and the „Honesty-Humility” domain of the HEXACO model. The following quote by Ted Cruz demonstrates this attribute:

...I made a promise to them that I make to you today, which is, if I am elected, every single day I will do two things: tell the truth and do what I said I would do.

(Seventh Republican Primary Debate, 28 January 2016)

## 5.2 Differences in self-presentation in commercials and speeches

According to Benoit and McHale (2003), commercials are better suited for self-presentation than interviews and debates because they offer more control over content. This is supported by Benoit's (1999) research, which found that self-presentation occurs significantly more frequently in commercials than in presidential debates. Talk shows are similarly limited in terms of self-presentation opportunities, as shown by Van Zoonen and Holtz-Bacha's (2002) research. Although speeches and commercials share a high level of content control, speeches allow for more complexity and nuance due to their interactive nature. Given these factors, the current study focused on analyzing self-presentation in commercials and speeches. A total of 920 fragments from commercials and 3,371 fragments from speeches were analyzed.

**Table 5.** Frequencies per format

	N	%
interview	2260	27.2
debate	1758	21.2
speech	3371	40.6
commercials	920	11.1

**Table 6.** Differences between formats

	Speeches	Commercials	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
egalitarian	.06 (.249)	.10 (.300)	-3.30 <sup>***</sup>	1284
patriotic	.09 (.288)	.06 (.229)	3.49 <sup>***</sup>	1793
reliable	.18 (.387)	.19 (.405)	-0.85	4289
anti-establishment	.07 (.255)	.06 (.235)	1.24 <sup>**</sup>	1558
empathetic	.07 (.250)	.11 (.318)	-3.92 <sup>***</sup>	1247
honest	.03 (.174)	.03 (.178)	-0.32	4289
enterprising	.20 (.426)	.29 (.462)	-5.28 <sup>***</sup>	1375
uniting	.15 (.359)	.15 (.370)	-0.43	4289
humble	.08 (.280)	.04 (.191)	5.48 <sup>***</sup>	2111
reliable	.08 (.279)	.08 (.363)	-5.28 <sup>***</sup>	1231
competent/confident	.30 (.532)	.26 (.472)	1.77 <sup>***</sup>	1613

*Note.*

\*\*  $p \leq .01$  \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ .

*The standard deviation always appears in parentheses below the mean.*

To compare the difference in the use of personality attributes between commercials ( $N=920$ ) and speeches ( $N=3371$ ), we used an independent samples T-test (Neels 2017). From Figure 1 we can conclude that both in speeches and commercials the presidential candidates mainly present themselves as competent/confident, enterprising, reliable, and uniting.

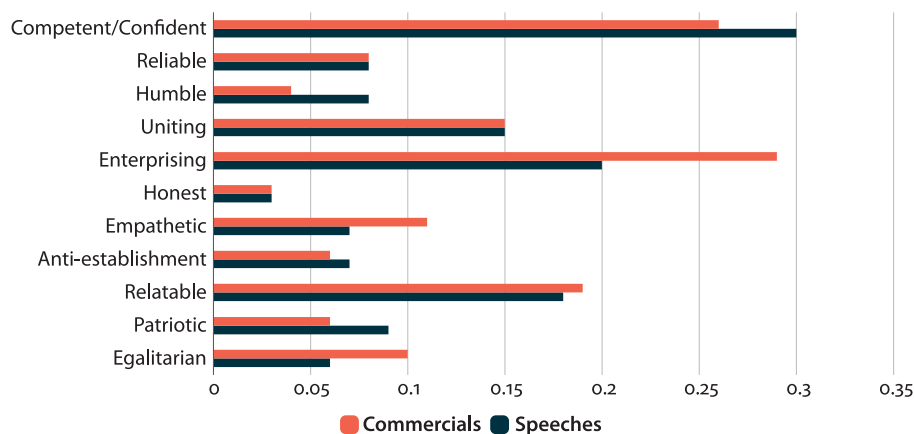


Figure 1. Mean differences between speeches and commercials

References to being egalitarian were used more often in commercials than in speeches ( $M=.10$ ,  $SD=.30$ ) ( $M=.06$ ,  $SD=.25$ ). This difference is significant ( $t=-3.3$ ;  $p<.001$ ). In addition, patriotic statements were ( $t=3.99$ ;  $p<.001$ ) more often used in speeches ( $M=.09$ ,  $SD=.29$ ) than in commercials ( $M=.06$ ,  $SD=.23$ ). The same applies to Competent/confident ( $M=.30$ ,  $SD=.532$ ) ( $t=1.77$ ;  $p<.001$ ). Next, in commercials ( $M=.11$ ,  $SD=.32$ ), the presidential candidates showed significantly more empathy ( $t=-3.92$ ;  $p<-.001$ ) than in speeches ( $M=.07$ ,  $SD=.25$ ). This also applies to entrepreneurship, which was also more often expressed in commercials ( $M=.29$ ,  $SD=.46$ ) than in speeches ( $M=.20$ ,  $SD=.43$ ). This difference was again significant ( $t=-5.28$ ;  $p<.001$ ). References to being humble appeared more in commercials ( $M=.04$ ,  $SD=.19$ ) than in speeches ( $M=.08$ ,  $SD=.28$ ) ( $t=5.48$ ;  $p<.001$ ). Statements referring to reliability also emerged more in commercials ( $M=.14$ ,  $SD=.36$ ) than in speeches ( $M=.08$ ,  $SD=.28$ ) ( $t=-5.28$ ;  $p<.001$ ).

### 5.3 Differences between Democrats and Republicans

To compare the use of the different personality attributes between the parties, an independent samples t-test was used. The table below shows the frequencies for

the number of fragments per party. We analyzed 3732 fragments of Republican presidential candidates and 4577 fragments of Democratic presidential candidates.

**Table 7.** Frequencies for Republicans and Democrats

	N	%
Republicans	3732	44.9%
Democrats	4577	55.1%

**Table 8.** Use of personality attributes in self-presentation for Republicans and Democrats

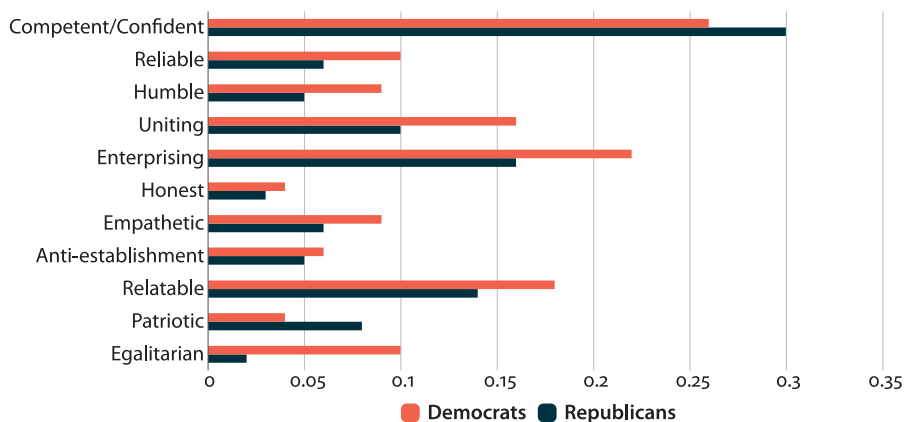
	Political party			
	Republicans	Democrats	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
egalitarian	.02 (.151)	.10 (.302)	-14.878***	7004
patriotic	.08 (.280)	.04 (.190)	8.608***	6320
relatable	.14 (.351)	.18 (.388)	-4.600***	8219
anti-establishment	.05 (.215)	.06 (.240)	-2.687**	8234
empathetic	.06 (.232)	.09 (.287)	-5.603***	8305
honest	.03 (.157)	.04 (.203)	-4.362***	8284
enterprising	.16 (.365)	.22 (.434)	-7.797***	8299
uniting	.10 (.309)	.16 (.368)	-6.965***	8300
humble	.05 (.214)	.09 (.295)	-7.903***	8196
reliable	.06 (.237)	.10 (.318)	-7.537***	8243
competent/confident	.37 (.556)	.29 (.520)	6.157***	7740

*Note.*

\*\*  $p \leq .01$  \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ .

*The standard deviation always appears in parentheses below the mean.*

From the figure below, we can conclude that both Democrats and Republicans mostly portray themselves as competent and confident. The second most used concept in self-presentation by both parties was entrepreneurial, followed by attempts to seem relatable. References to honesty were used least frequently by both parties. Furthermore, among Republicans, the least used attributes were honest and egalitarian. Among Democrats, honest and patriotic were the least common.



**Figure 2.** Differences between Republicans and Democrats

Looking at the results up-close we see that Democrats ( $M=.10$ ,  $SD=.30$ ) use references to being egalitarian more frequently than Republicans ( $M=.02$ ,  $SD=.15$ ) ( $t=-14.878$ ;  $p<.001$ ). We found that Democrats ( $M=.18$ ,  $SD=.38$ ) attempted to appear relatable more often than Republicans ( $M=0.14$ ,  $SD=.35$ ) ( $t=-4.600$ ;  $p<.001$ ). Republican candidates ( $M=.08$ ,  $SD=.28$ ) used references to patriotism significantly more often ( $t=8.608$ ;  $p<.001$ ) than Democratic candidates ( $M=.04$ ,  $SD=.19$ ). Next, competence/confidence was significantly ( $t=6.157$ ;  $p<.001$ ) more frequently claimed by Republicans ( $M=.37$ ,  $SD=.55$ ) than by Democrats ( $M=.29$ ,  $SD=.52$ ). Furthermore, Republicans ( $M=.09$ ,  $SD=.28$ ) refer to empathy more than Democrats ( $M=.06$ ,  $SD=.23$ ) ( $t=-5.603$ ;  $p<.001$ ). By contrast, the personality traits enterprising, unifying, and reliable are more often used by Democrats compared to Republicans. We see a significant difference ( $t=-7.797$ ;  $p<.001$ ) for enterprising between Democrats ( $M=.22$ ,  $SD=.43$ ) and Republicans ( $M=.16$ ,  $SD=.36$ ). Also, Democrats ( $M=.16$ ,  $SD=.36$ ) significantly ( $t=-6.965$ ;  $p<.001$ ) more often try to appear unifying than Republicans ( $M=.10$ ,  $SD=.30$ ). And finally, the use of the personality attribute reliable points to a significant difference ( $t=-7.537$ ;  $p<.001$ ) between Democrats ( $M=.10$ ,  $SD=.31$ ) and

Republicans ( $M = .06$ ,  $SD = .23$ ). Again, this attribute is more commonly used by Democrats.

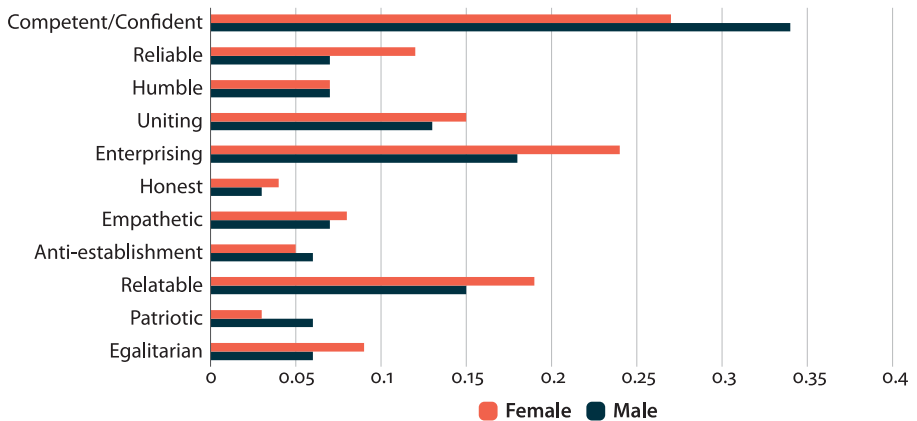
#### 5.4 Differences between male and female presidential candidates

In the 2016 and 2020, three female candidates took part in the US presidential elections along with ten male candidates. The table below shows the frequencies of fragments per gender. There were 6,413 and 1,896 fragments coded for men and women, respectively. Male presidential candidates account for about three quarters of the fragments at 77.2%.

**Table 9.** Frequencies gender

	N	%
male	6413	77.2%
female	1896	22.8%

The figure below shows the difference in the use of personality attributes by gender. This shows that women mainly present themselves as competent/confident, enterprising, and relatable. Women are the least likely to apply the attribute patriotic in their self-presentation. Men show the same trend in terms of most used personality traits, however, the least frequently used attribute among men is honest.



**Figure 3.** Gender differences

Women ( $M = .09$ ,  $SD = .28$ ) referred to the attribute egalitarian significantly ( $t = -4.101$ ;  $p < .001$ ) more often than men ( $M = .06$ ,  $SD = .23$ ). Furthermore, relatable was used less often by men ( $M = .15$ ,  $SD = .36$ ) than women ( $M = .19$ ,  $SD = .40$ ;  $t = -3.743$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Furthermore, the attribute patriotic was on average used

**Table 10.** Use of personality attributes in self-presentation for men and women

	Gender		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	Male	Female		
egalitarian	.06 (.235)	.09 (.289)	-4.101 ***	2678
patriotic	.06 (.249)	.03 (.184)	5.821 ***	4155
relatable	.15 (.363)	.19 (.402)	-3.743 ***	2867
anti-establishment	.06 (.230)	.05 (.226)	.338	8307
empathetic	.07 (.259)	.08 (.281)	-1.709	2912
honest	.03 (.182)	.04 (.190)	-.467	8307
enterprising	.18 (.398)	.24 (.430)	-5.399 ***	2918
uniting	.13 (.338)	.15 (.362)	-1.783	2945
humble	.07 (.263)	.07 (.260)	.746	8307
reliable	.07 (.267)	.12 (.338)	-5.402 ***	2631
competent/confident	.34 (.550)	.27 (.489)	5.812 ***	3435

Note

\*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ .

The standard deviation always appears in parentheses below the mean.

more often by men ( $M = .06$ ,  $SD = .24$ ) than by women ( $M = .03$ ,  $SD = .18$ ;  $t = 5.821$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Competent/confident again shows a significant difference between men ( $M = .34$ ,  $SD = .55$ ) and women ( $M = .27$ ,  $SD = .48$ ). Men refer to this attribute more often than women ( $t = 5.812$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The attribute entrepreneurial was more commonly used by women ( $M = .24$ ,  $SD = .43$ ;  $t = -5.399$ ,  $p < .001$ ) than men ( $M = .18$ ,  $SD = .39$ ). In addition, women ( $M = .12$ ,  $SD = .33$ ) more frequently referred to being reliable than men ( $M = .07$ ,  $SD = .26$ ;  $t = -5.402$ ;  $p < .001$ ). Lastly, we found that there was no significant difference in the anti-establishment claims between male and female candidates ( $t = .338$ ,  $p = .735$ ). The differences in the references to empathetic ( $t = -1.702$ ;  $p = .089$ ), uniting ( $t = -1.783$ ,  $p = .075$ ), humble ( $t = .746$ ,  $p = .45$ ) were not significant.



## 6. Discussion

The increased focus on politicians' personalities in media coverage and the personalization of politics has led politicians to engage in strategic self-presentation (Garzia *et al.* 2021; Schütz 1998). This study aimed to contribute to the existing understanding of self-presentation by employing both qualitative and quantitative methods to identify personality attributes used during the 2016 and 2020 US elections. In this section, we will discuss the implications of our findings and draw connections between the personality attributes identified and previous research in the field.

### 6.1 Personality attributes and self-presentation (RQ1)

In line with previous research, our study reveals that presidential candidates frequently emphasize their competence and confidence (29.4%). Self-confidence is considered as a crucial quality of effective leadership, and political elites exhibit higher levels of self-confidence than the general population (Caprara and Silvester 2018). Clifford (2018) also recognizes self-confidence as the most significant character trait in assessing a presidential candidate. The concept of entrepreneurial, reflecting a resolute, action-oriented attitude, ranked second most common in our study (18.9%), which is comparable to the "drive" trait identified in Benoit and McHale's (2003) analysis of presidential campaign spots. The third most frequent concept in our data (15.4%), relatable, can be linked to the growing importance of identity politics in Western democracies, which encompasses not only political identity but also other identities such as gender, ethnicity, and sexuality that affect the processing of political information, including the self-presentation of a presidential candidate (Boyer, Aaldering, and Lecheler 2020).

The prevalence of the traits unifying (13%) and reliable (8.1%) can be linked to the US political context. High polarization and low trust in the government may have contributed to the need for a trustworthy and unifying presidential candidate. Citrin and Stoker (2018) suggest that a charismatic candidate with strong values and integrity could restore trust in political institutions.

Our sample revealed references to empathy (7.3%), humility (6.8%), egalitarianism (6.4%), and patriotism (5.6%), which aligns with the literature on social desirability and political relevance (Benoit and McHale 2003; Clifford 2018). Empathy is valued by voters and positively impacts attitudes towards candidates and their electoral success (Renstrom and Ottati 2020). Egalitarianism is a core value in American politics, with its "trait-ownership" mainly in the Democratic camp. Patriotism is often discussed during times of uncertainty, income inequality, and military interventions abroad (Ariely 2017). Lastly, the concept of "humble"

was based on the HEXACO model's "honesty-humility" factor and included statements that candidates do not always know better and rely on science for decision-making. This is in line with recent research on intellectual humility, which indicates that it can be favorable for a candidate to reflect on the accuracy of one's own beliefs and to seek information impartially, potentially moderating the polarization of the American political context (Bowes *et al.* 2021).

Moreover, anti-establishment speeches facilitated presidential candidates to position themselves in opposition to the prevailing order, which was observed in 5.5 percent of our sample. Serazio (2016) characterizes anti-establishment rhetoric as a means for politicians to present themselves as "outsiders" who challenge the concentration of power. As a remedy, politicians propose themselves as a substitute for the current ruling class, thereby enhancing the political system's capacity to represent the citizens' needs and desires (Barr 2009).

Unexpectedly, references to honesty were the least frequent in our sample, amounting to only 3.4 percent. However, honesty is regarded as one of the most crucial qualities that presidential candidates are assessed on (Fridkin and Kenney 2011). This trait emanates from the "honesty-humility" factor of the HEXACO model, as identified by Ashton *et al.* (2014). It is possible that self-proclaimed honesty may be less effective than references to other attributes.

## 6.2 Self-presentation in commercials and speeches

Prior studies highlighted speeches as the most effective and personalized mode of communication for self-presentation (Yi 2016). Commercials, in contrast, feature simplified messaging and a less spontaneous style, thereby reaching voters who are not directly seeking information about the candidate (Katz 2016). Previous studies have also suggested that negative messaging in political ads has contributed to growing political cynicism among voters (Hill 1989).

However, our study presents a contrasting view on the difference in self-presentation between commercials and speeches. We found that commercials tend to emphasize more positive personality attributes such as empathy, humility, reliability, entrepreneurial spirit, and egalitarianism. In contrast, speeches tend to underscore patriotism. Our findings complement earlier research by Benoit and McHale (2003) on the personal qualities highlighted by presidential candidates in commercials from 1952 to 2000. In our sample, empathy was found in 11% of the commercials and only 7.5% of speeches. Furthermore, the personality attribute "entrepreneurial" was most common in commercials, comprising 29% versus 20% in speeches, which corresponds with the references to the "drive" dimension identified by Benoit and McHale (2003) in 27% of the commercials.

### 6.3 Self-presentation of Democratic and Republican candidates

Previous research has demonstrated the phenomenon of “trait ownership” (Hayes 2005) whereby voters associate certain traits with political parties (Clifford 2019). Specifically, Democrats are generally perceived as more empathetic and sincere (Clifford 2019), while Republicans are associated with strong leadership and morals (Carney *et al.* 2008; Hayes 2005), patriotism, toughness, respect, loyalty, and virtue.

Our findings align with this perception, as Democrats prioritize traits such as identification, humility, trustworthiness, and unity, while Republicans emphasize patriotism, competence, confidence, honesty (Clifford 2019; Graham *et al.* 2009) and empathy. Notably, the emphasis on empathy by Republicans could be due to the phenomenon of trait ownership, where parties may highlight properties of their rivals to win voters (Hayes 2005). Additionally, Gilmore and Rowling (2019) found that Democrats focus more on patriotism and American exceptionalism than Republicans to appeal to voters. Thus, our findings only partially support the idea that rival parties would focus on the traits ‘owned’ by their ideological counterparts to challenge expectations, such as Republicans foregrounding their empathy. Contrary to the findings of Gilmore and Rowling (2019), Republicans are also putting emphasis on patriotism as to be expected following conservative values (Clifford 2019; Hayes 2005). This can potentially be explained by the specific campaign context or candidate’s attempts to protect their territory on the ideological spectrum.

### 6.4 Self-presentation of male and female candidates

This study contributes to the limited literature on the personality and self-presentation of female politicians, comparing personality attributes used by female and male presidential candidates to describe themselves. Prior research has not systematically compared female and male politicians in terms of self-presentation. However, earlier studies suggest that women are mainly associated with warm and soft personality traits, while men are associated with assertiveness, competitiveness, and toughness (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993). Our findings are consistent with this, as women in our study emphasized identification, egalitarianism, reliability, and entrepreneurial spirit, while men emphasized patriotism, competence, and self-confidence. Interestingly, women emphasized being entrepreneurial more than men, which differs from previous literature. This is possibly explained by Hayes (2011) who argues that women focus more on masculine characteristics to avoid stereotyping.

## 6.5 Contribution and limitations

The aim of this study was to examine the self-presentation of presidential candidates during the 2016 and 2020 campaign periods, specifically in terms of personality traits. The research contributes to the literature in this area, which has previously focused more on communication styles and themes. The results can facilitate interdisciplinary research on the connections between social space, media discourse, and self-presentation. The study may also increase public awareness of how politicians tailor their messages to voters.

However, limitations of the study include the absence of a comprehensive media database at the start, a sample that only included female Democratic candidates, and difficulties in translating qualitative concepts into quantitative variables. Despite these limitations, the study raises important questions about the relationships between gender, party affiliation, and success factors.

Finally, although combining qualitative and quantitative methods offers benefits of triangulation, it also presents challenges in translating qualitative concepts into quantitative variables. The inductive establishment of concepts required repetitive inter-coder reliability testing and redefinition, and ultimately led to the removal of certain concepts that did not meet the reliability threshold despite their theoretical importance.

## 7. Conclusions

This study examines the trend toward increasing personalization in political communication, which emphasizes the person behind the politician and personal characteristics to build an interesting public persona (Kriesi 2011). The study analyzed data from the 2016 and 2020 US presidential election campaigns to determine the characteristics that presidential candidates emphasized in their self-presentation during speeches, commercials, interviews, and debates. The analysis (*RQ1*) found that competence and confidence were the most emphasized traits, while honesty was the least used attribute. We also found that references to egalitarianism, empathy, being enterprising, humility, and trustworthiness were more frequent in commercials than in speeches (*RQ2*). Additionally, Democrats were more likely to emphasize egalitarianism, identification, and anti-establishment orientation, while Republicans were more likely to emphasize patriotism, competence/confidence, empathy, and honesty (*RQ3*). Women were more likely to describe themselves as egalitarian, enterprising, and trustworthy, while men were more likely to emphasize competence and confidence (*RQ4*). To sum up, this study contributed to the knowledge of self-presentation by defining

and quantifying new concepts that previously did not or rarely occurred in the literature on self-presentation of politicians, and giving a systematic and comparative overview of these concepts.

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