

Character Counts? Honesty and Fairness in Election 2000

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the impact voters' evaluations of the candidates' character had on their vote choice using the 2000 presidential election. We find that while the magnitude of the impact of character on the vote was roughly equal for both major party candidates, contrary to common perception, the substantive significance of character evaluations disproportionately affected George Bush. Our results indicate the need to account for the influence of character in other elections given that character issues are a recurring theme in American presidential campaigns.

## **Introduction**

Issues of character are a recurring theme in presidential politics. Adlai Stevenson's divorce, George Romney's "brainwashing", Nixon's Watergate, Gary Hart's Monkey Business, George H.W. Bush's lips, and the name Gennifer Flowers all evoke memories of campaigns influenced by issues of character. Despite this pedigree, our understanding of character's role in the vote choice is still emerging.

The study of character is increasingly important because the rise of candidate centered campaigns portends an increase in its role (Wattenberg 1992). Over time we have seen a shift from voting based on social or group identification to an increased reliance on campaign themes (Graber 2002, 237-8) concurrent with the emergence of a closely divided electorate. In this context, we expect campaign specific effects to have a greater influence on vote choice (Shaw 1999). Such a change suggests a larger role for character perceptions because they are more changeable than are aspects of an individual's identity, such as partisan affiliation (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002), or even issue positions.

To the extent that character evaluations have been examined, conclusions about their impact on the vote vary depending on the context in which they are studied (see for instance Miller and Shanks 1996, Doherty and Gimpel 1997). To the extent that character evaluations have been examined, conclusions about their impact on the vote vary depending on the context in which they are studied (see for instance Miller and Shanks 1996, Doherty and Gimpel 1997). For instance, building on theories of issue ownership (Petrocik 1996), Hayes's theory of trait ownership suggests that voters see Republicans as stronger on leadership and moral issues and Democrats as more compassionate and empathetic (2005). However, strategic candidates can "trespass" on their opponent's trait advantage by deviating from the public's expectations of a

candidate's character. Conversely, Hayes (2005, 11) notes that: "A candidate who falls short of these party based expectations....may lose standing in the eyes of voters who expected more."

We provide new evidence to augment these past studies by examining the impact of character evaluations in the 2000 presidential election using the *Voter News Service, General Election Exit Poll 2000* (VNS). Our results show that character evaluations were statistically and substantively significant predictors of the vote. We also find that while the magnitude of the impact of character evaluations was comparable across candidates, consistent with the concept of "trait trespassing" adverse evaluations disproportionately harmed George W. Bush rather than Al Gore.

### **Character in 2000**

The 2000 presidential election is remembered mostly for its unique aftermath. But the campaign was also noteworthy in that a race that was widely expected to emphasize the importance of the Vice President's contribution to the economy evolved into one in which character was at the forefront. Al Gore routinely faced questions about his honesty. Republican ads and rhetoric mocked his putative claim to have invented the internet and cast doubt on his truthfulness. Meanwhile, George W. Bush appealed to the electorate as the candidate who would restore honor and dignity to the White House. In the end, political science's best forecasting models, which ignore character and whose indicators are chiefly economic, predicted a decisive victory for Al Gore (see *PS: Political Science & Politics*, March 2001). Yet despite these signals, the impact of character issues in 2000 is unknown.

### **Character and the Vote**

The claim that character considerations influence voting behavior has a strong theoretical basis. Individuals commonly use personality characteristics to form and update evaluations; they

adopt the same kinds of criteria that they find useful and informative in ordinary life to evaluate presidential candidates both directly and indirectly (Rahn et al. 1990).

Character can be *directly* informative about a candidate's temperament and suitability for office. The traits of competence and integrity are especially important (Funk 1996, 1997; Kinder 1986; Kinder et al. 1980). Thus, "the public's ideal president .... is honest, knowledgeable, and open-minded" (Kinder et al. 1980, 319; see also, Funk 1999; Glass 1985; Sullivan et al. 1990). Perceptions of character weakness are costly (Goren 2002). Scandals that lead to questions of a candidate's judgment or to charges that he or she is unpresidential, like those that overwhelmed Gary Hart in 1987, can therefore quickly ruin a candidacy (Stoker 1993). Character is also *indirectly* informative for voters by providing clues as to how a candidate might govern once in office (Barber 1992; Miller et al. 1986) and cues as to his concerns and priorities (Popkin 1991). In addition, character may prompt emotional responses that affect approval (Ragsdale 1991), and where it evokes anxiety lead to the abandonment of habitual behavior in an election, or enthusiasm to greater involvement in an election (Marcus 1988; Marcus and MacKuen 1993).

## **Data and Methods**

This paper examines the degree to which character evaluations influenced the 2000 Presidential election using the *Voter News Service General Election Exit Polls, 2000* (VNS).<sup>1</sup> The VNS data are unique in that, unlike general public opinion polls, they are a representative sample of our population of interest—all presidential election voters in 2000.<sup>2</sup> Importantly,

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, comparable character questions are unavailable in the VNS for previous elections.

<sup>2</sup> The VNS national sample is a subsample of the state samples. The probability of selecting precincts in a state was the same as it would have been if precincts were selected at a uniform rate nationwide except that minority precincts were selected at a higher rate. Within each state, precincts were selected with a probability proportionate to the

virtually all of the measures thought to influence voting decisions are included on their survey, thereby allowing us to assess the impact of character while controlling for traditional explanations of the vote (see Rosenstone and Hansen 1993 for a review). Moreover, the sample size of 2,971 for the national poll is large enough for us to draw valid statistical inferences about influences on the vote.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the use of exit polls helps to overcome biases that may result from respondents' over-reporting of the vote as observed in opinion polls such as the *American National Election Study*.<sup>4</sup>

While the results of the VNS exit polls were controversial since they led to the incorrect call on the night of the election, the call was not based on the national sample employed here (Mitofsky 2001).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the accuracy of the national poll we employ is guaranteed by the weights applied by the investigators.<sup>6</sup> The accuracy of this procedure is demonstrated by the fact that George Bush officially garnered 47.9% of the votes cast nationally, while the exit poll estimated that Bush obtained 47.6%.

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number of voters in each precinct. However, in some states minority precincts were sampled at a higher rate (Voter News Service 2000, 9). The response rate was 51% (Biemer et al. 2003).

<sup>3</sup> The sample most appropriate for investigating character issues (i.e., the gray form) constitutes about ¼ of the entire exit poll (N=13,265) which consists of four separate surveys.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, over 50% of respondents in the 1998 American National Election Study reported voting while the Federal Elections Commission, calculated turnout at 36.4%. See <http://www.fec.gov/pages/reg&to98.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Mitofsky (2001) explains that these incorrect results were due to improper weights being applied.

<sup>6</sup> The weighting process is described in the VNS codebook as follows: "weighting takes in to account the different probabilities of selecting a precinct and of selecting a voter within each precinct. For example, states that were selected at a higher rate receive a smaller weight than do other precincts of the same size. There is also an adjustment for voters who were missed or refused to be interviewed, which is based on their observed age, race and sex." (Voter News Service 2000, 9).

The dependent variable in this analysis is whether or not the respondent voted for George W. Bush. The *Bush Vote* is explained by a series of independent variables commonly used to explain an individual's voting behavior. We try to account for each of Miller and Shanks' (1996, 562-3) categories of social characteristics, partisan identification, policy related predispositions, current policy preferences, perceptions of current conditions,<sup>7</sup> and retrospective evaluations of presidential performance. Miller and Shanks find that character evaluations account for little additional variance in vote choice once they control for these influences (see also, Miller and Shanks 1982; Shanks and Miller 1990, 1991). We indicate the category that each variable represents in parentheses below. The coding procedures, question wording, and summary statistics are further detailed in Appendix A.

Historically the strongest predictor of the voting decision is an individual's *Party* affiliation (e.g., Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes 1960). Political philosophy, or *Ideology* (policy related predispositions), has also been demonstrated to have a large impact on the vote (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). For these variables, higher values are more Republican and conservative respectively, and should be positively signed. In addition, we include a series of dichotomous variables that account for whether or not the voter is *Black*, *Latino* or *Female*. Each of these is scored '1' for group members and '0' otherwise and should be negatively signed. *Education* reflects the respondent's highest degree completed (these are all social characteristics). The variable *Economy* accounts for the impact of economic evaluations, by assessing the degree to which the respondent is worried about the future performance of the

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<sup>7</sup> We are unable to include a measure of retrospective evaluations. However, perceptions of current conditions are likely to be driven to some degree by past conditions (Fiorina 1981). Also, prospective evaluations of the economy are at least as important as retrospective evaluations (MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1992).

stock market (perceptions of current conditions).<sup>8</sup> Higher scores indicate less concern about the market. Additionally, we add two controls that account for the degree to which voters perceived Al Gore or George W. Bush as knowledgeable. These two variables called *Gore Knows* and *Bush Knows* are coded '1' if a candidate was perceived as knowledgeable and '0' if they were seen as unknowledgeable. The *Gore Knows* variable should be negatively signed while *Bush Knows* should be positively signed.

Some scholars argue that the influence of character evaluations on the vote is tempered by both voters' perceptions of the candidates' issue stands and their evaluation of the incumbent president's policies (Miller and Shanks 1996). To account for the impact of issue evaluations on the vote choice, we include dummy variables that tap respondents' preferences on three salient issues. The issues include questions about the candidates' plans for: investing *Social Security* in the stock market, *Tax Cuts*, and strengthening *Gun Control* legislation (current policy preferences). For each of these dummy variables, the position propounded by George W. Bush is coded '1'. The position closest to that held by Al Gore is coded '0'. Voters' evaluations of President *Clinton* are operationalized using a three point scale that assesses whether the voter would like to see the next president continue Clinton's policies, or change to more liberal or conservative policies (retrospective evaluations of presidential performance). Higher scores are associated with support for George W. Bush.<sup>9</sup>

The central variables of interest pertain to character evaluations. Two questions from the poll are used to operationalize distinct aspects of character. First, the dummy variables *Bush*

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<sup>8</sup> While this is not the preferred measure of economic evaluations, Gleisner (1992) shows that the change in the Dow Jones Industrial Average during an election year significantly affects a presidential candidate's vote share.

<sup>9</sup> While not ideal, this is the only question on the form that assesses Clinton either directly or indirectly.

*Lies* and *Gore Lies* were created based on the question: “Regardless of how you voted today, which of these candidates do you think would say anything to get elected president?”

Respondents who replied “Bush”, or “both would” were coded as viewing Bush as untruthful. Those who replied “Gore” or “neither” were coded as viewing Bush as truthful. Respondents who responded “Gore” or “both would” were coded as viewing Gore as untruthful. Those who replied “Bush” or “neither” were coded as viewing Gore as truthful. The second character question assesses the degree to which Bush and Gore ran fair campaigns. We coded responses to the question: “Did either of these candidates attack the other unfairly?” Responses were used to create the variables *Bush Unfair* and *Gore Unfair* coded as in the question above.

The statistical model constructed from the above variables is specified as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Bush Vote} = & \alpha + \beta_1 * \text{Party} + \beta_2 * \text{Ideology} + \beta_3 * \text{Clinton} + \beta_4 * \text{Black} + \beta_5 * \text{Latino} \\ & + \beta_6 * \text{Education} + \beta_7 * \text{Female} + \beta_8 * \text{Economy} + \beta_9 * \text{Bush Knows} \\ & + \beta_{10} * \text{Gore Knows} + \beta_{11} * \text{Bush Lies} + \beta_{12} * \text{Gore Lies} + \beta_{13} * \text{Bush Unfair} \\ & + \beta_{14} * \text{Gore Unfair} + \beta_{15} * \text{Social Security} + \beta_{16} * \text{Tax Cuts} \\ & + \beta_{17} * \text{Gun Control} + \epsilon. \end{aligned}$$

If character exerted an independent influence on vote choice in the 2000 election then we should find that the truthfulness and the fairness variables are large and significant predictors of the vote controlling for traditional influences. In particular, variables that improve the likelihood of voting for Bush, *Gore Lies* and *Gore Unfair* will be positively signed, while those that decrease the probability of voting for Bush, *Bush Lies* and *Bush Unfair* will be negatively signed.

## **Results**

To estimate factors affecting *Bush Vote*, we use probit which is appropriate when the dependent variable is dichotomous as in the case of examining whether or not a respondent voted for Bush. However, because the exit polls are not based on a simple random sample, we need to

account for sample weights in order to ensure representativeness.<sup>10</sup> The results of this estimation are seen in Table 1.

—TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE—

These results are consistent with both past voting behavior research and claims that character evaluations played a central role in the 2000 Presidential election. With the exception of the *Economy*, *Education*, *Latino* and *Sex* variables, all of the background controls are highly significant and signed in the expected direction. In addition, the *Bush Lies*, *Gore Lies*, *Bush Unfair* and *Gore Unfair* variables are all significant and signed as expected. These results suggest that character evaluations don't disproportionately benefit one party over the other—those who saw either candidate unfavorably were significantly less likely to vote for that candidate even after controlling for party and issue preferences. Clearly, character evaluations played a highly significant role in the 2000 election.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Cost of Character**

While the statistical results show that character variables are significant they do not fully communicate the magnitude of the influence character has on the probability an individual will vote for George W. Bush. How much does character count? The magnitude of the effect of character on the vote reflects one of the key themes of the Bush campaign, which sought to portray Vice President Gore as untruthful. We can calculate how much these types of claims matter by creating a hypothetical “average” voter—one with characteristics set to the average of each of the variables included in our analysis. By manipulating the character variables one at a

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<sup>10</sup> The weights are incorporated by using the `svyprobit` command in Stata.

<sup>11</sup> An alternative to the claim that character affects vote choice is that character evaluations might simply be a convenient *post hoc* rationalization for a vote choice (Goren 2002). Additional analysis, available on request from the authors, clearly rejects this alternative explanation.

time, from truthful to untruthful and from fair to unfair, we can examine how shifts in character perceptions influence the probability of voting for George Bush.<sup>12</sup>

—TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE—

The relatively large effects depicted in Table 2 show that an average voter who views Bush as likely to say anything to get elected is 17 percentage points less likely to vote for him than is the voter who views him as truthful. Similarly, the voter who views Bush as unfair is about 21 percentage points less likely to vote for him. The impact of character on Al Gore is similar in that those who view him as willing to say anything to get elected or as running an unfair campaign are 12 and 19 percentage points less likely to vote for him, respectively. The importance of character evaluations is further demonstrated by comparing them to the impact of a shift in the average voter's ideology. A similar one category shift in ideology from "moderate" to "conservative" increases the probability of voting for Bush by about 11 percentage points (from 45% to 56%).

The simulations also allow us to examine the combined impact of the lying and unfairness variables on the Bush vote by comparing the outcome when a voter perceives a candidate as being both truthful and fair with the outcome when a voter perceives a candidate as both untruthful and unfair. This procedure is useful because campaigns that disparage a candidate's character seem likely to also affect the degree to which a candidate is perceived as being fair.<sup>13</sup> The results of these analyses are stentorian and are seen in the bottom two rows of Table 2. The average voter who sees Bush as both willing to say anything and as attacking Gore

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<sup>12</sup> These estimates and are obtained using the Clarify procedure (King, Tomz and Wittenberg, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Indeed, the Bush Unfair and Bush Lies variables correlate at about .35 and the Gore Unfair and Gore Lies variables correlate at about .47.

unfairly is 37 percentage points less likely to vote for Bush. Conversely the probability of voting for Bush increases by 30 percentage points for the voter that views Gore in these negative terms. The combined effects are so large that they rival the impact of a shift in party identification from “independent” to “Republican” which increases the probability of voting for Bush by about 35 percentage points (from 34% to 69%).<sup>14</sup>

Among the most noteworthy findings in these results is that in every case the impact of character is larger for Bush than for Gore. While the size of the differences between candidates ranges from about 8 to 40 percentage points, the results suggest that changes in character evaluations disproportionately affected George W. Bush. However, these changes in vote probabilities fail to convey whether or not a shift in character evaluations impacted an individual’s final voting decision. Put more simply, a 30% point decrease in the probability of voting for Bush that causes the voter to go from being 90% likely to vote for Bush to 60% likely to vote for Bush is less substantively important than a shift from 65% to 35%. In this latter case the vote decision changes as a result of the probability shift. Consequently, it is important to examine the end points of these probability shifts in combination with their magnitude.

—FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE—

Figure 1 shows the disproportionate impact character evaluations had on the vote for George Bush versus Al Gore. It illustrates the change in the probability of voting for Bush as evaluations of truthfulness and fairness change. These voting probabilities are plotted for both of the answers (yes and no) to the character questions relative to the 50% line. The 50% line is substantively important because estimates below 50% imply a vote against Bush while estimates

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<sup>14</sup> However, these character effects are small relative to a shift across the entire political spectrum. A shift from Democrat to Republican increases the probability of voting for Bush from about 10% to about 69%.

above this line imply a vote for Bush. For instance, the first plot shows that voters who thought that Bush would not say anything to get elected had a 56% probability of voting for him. In contrast, those who thought Bush would say anything had a 37% probability of voting for him.

Figure 1 implies that the statistical results described above, while strong, understate the substantive importance of the shifts in vote probability which seems to be greatest for Bush. Voters who saw Bush as truthful or fair were certain to vote for him, while those who saw him as untruthful or unfair were certain to vote against him—in neither case do the confidence intervals around the point estimates intersect the 50% line. In contrast, the effects on the Gore vote were less decisive: those who saw Gore as truthful or fair were likely to vote for him, those who did not were effectively undecided (the confidence intervals overlap the 50% threshold).<sup>15</sup>

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Examining the role of truthfulness and fairness in the 2000 presidential election using national election exit polls, we find that contrary to past work, character evaluations played a statistically and substantively significant role in influencing voters' choice for president. For instance, a change in the perception of George Bush from truthful to untruthful decreased the probability an individual would vote for him by 17%. Indeed, these results are so strong that the shift in perception described above leads an average voter to change their decision to vote for Gore rather than Bush. Moreover, they suggest the possibility that the impact of character evaluations is not equal for all candidates. The magnitude of the influence of character is generally greater for Bush than for Gore.

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<sup>15</sup> However, the confidence interval around the vote probability when Gore is viewed as unfair just narrowly crosses the .5 threshold.

At first glance the finding that character had a lopsided impact on the vote for Bush is puzzling given the fact that the Bush campaign went to great lengths to stigmatize Gore as untrustworthy. However, viewed from the perspective of issue and trait ownership theories, the disproportionately large changes among Bush voters is not surprising (i.e., Petrocik 1996, Hayes 2005).<sup>16</sup> Issue ownership theory holds that those casting a vote on the basis of character would vote for the Republican candidate—voters casting a ballot on the basis of truthfulness would be more likely to vote for Bush while those who ignore this criterion would be more likely to vote for Gore. Consequently, it is not surprising that character voters, faced with information that runs contrary to the stereotype motivating their vote choice—that the candidate is not truthful—would be more likely to shift their vote than would voters who are not casting their vote on that basis. Consistent with Hayes’s (2005) research, character voters who perceived Bush as being less honest than they expected were likely to switch their vote. While the magnitude of this asymmetry is not large, it is consistent across all of the statistical and substantive results presented herein. Moreover, it is strongest when comparing the impact of truthfulness on an individual’s propensity to vote for Bush versus Gore. In this case, a shift in perceptions of Bush from truthful to untruthful leads to a shift in the vote choice from Bush to Gore. The opposite does not occur.

These results offer some prescriptions for further research. First, they suggest that scholars examining voting behavior ought to routinely incorporate character into their analysis of individuals’ voting decisions, particularly since elections have become increasingly candidate centered. Second, the possibility of asymmetry across candidates suggests that scholars must

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<sup>16</sup> It is also consistent with Frankovic and McDermott’s (2001) observation that personal qualities were given more weight by Bush voters than by Gore voters.

further account for the fact that character evaluations might disproportionately favor one candidate over the other.

## Appendix A. Variables Used in the Statistical Analysis

Variable Name	Source/ Wording/ Mean	Coding
Bush Vote	VNS 2000. In today's election for president, did you just vote for: Mean=.476	1 if respondent voted for Bush, 0 otherwise.
Party	VNS 2000. No matter how you voted today, do you usually think of yourself as a: Mean=.363	1 if Republican, 0 otherwise.
Ideology	VNS 2000. On most political matters, do you consider yourself: Mean=2.09	1 if liberal, 2 if moderate, 3 if conservative.
Black	VNS 2000. Are you: Mean=.096	1 if Black, 0 otherwise.
Latino	VNS 2000. Are you: Mean=.064	1 if Latino, 0 otherwise.
Female	VNS 2000. Are you: Mean=.524	1 if Female, 0 otherwise.
Bush Knows	VNS 2000. Regardless of how you voted today, which of these candidates has the knowledge to serve effectively as president? Mean=.55	1 if Bush alone, or if both Bush and Gore have the knowledge to serve effectively as President, 0 otherwise.
Gore Knows	VNS 2000. Regardless of how you voted today, which of these candidates has the knowledge to serve effectively as president? Mean=.689	1 if Gore alone, or if both Bush and Gore have the knowledge to serve effectively as President, 0 otherwise.
Bush Lies	VNS 2000. Regardless of how you voted today, which of these candidates do you think would say anything to get elected president? Mean=.593	1 if Bush alone, or both Bush and Gore would say anything to get elected president, 0 otherwise.
Gore Lies	VNS 2000. Regardless of how you voted today, which of these candidates do you think would say anything to get elected president? Mean=.754	1 if Gore alone, or both Bush and Gore would say anything to get elected president, 0 otherwise.
Economy	VNS 2000. How worried are you about the future performance of the stock market? Mean=2.39	1 if very worried, 2 if somewhat worried, 3 if not too worried, 4 if not worried at all.
Education	VNS 2000. What was the last grade of school you completed? Mean=3.28	1 Did not complete high school, 2 high school graduate, 3 some college or associate degree, 4 college graduate, 5 postgraduate study.

Variable Name	Source/ Wording/ Mean	Coding
Bush Unfair	VNS 2000. Did either of these candidates for president attack the other unfairly? Mean=.516	1 if Bush alone, or both Bush and Gore attacked their opponent unfairly, 0 otherwise.
Gore Unfair	VNS 2000. Did either of these candidates for president attack the other unfairly? Mean=.628	1 if Gore alone, or both Bush and Gore attacked their opponent unfairly, 0 otherwise.
Gun Control	VNS 2000. Do you support or oppose stricter gun control legislation? Mean=.375	1 Oppose, 0 support.
Tax Cuts	VNS 2000. Which tax cut plan do you prefer? Mean=.533	1 A larger plan providing an across the board tax cut to most people, 0 A smaller plan targeting tax cuts to lower and middle income people.
Social Security	VNS 2000. Do you support or oppose a plan in which individuals could invest some of their Social Security taxes in the stock market? Mean=.597	1 Support, 0 oppose.
Clinton	VNS 2000. Would you rather see the next president: Mean=2.37	1 Change to more liberal policies, 2 Continue Clintons policies, 3 Change to more liberal policies.

All question locations are based on the Grey form. Question wording was identical across forms, but the question order varied.

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Table 1. Probit of Influences on the Bush Vote using the survey weights.

	All Voters
Constant	-2.51*** (.386)
Bush Lies	-.512*** (.108)
Gore Lies	.339** (.121)
Bush Unfair	-.579*** (.124)
Gore Unfair	.504*** (.121)
Bush Knowledgeable	1.35*** (.10)
Gore Knowledgeable	-.884*** (.123)
Black	-.837*** (.252)
Latino	-.234 (.192)
Sex	.113 (.095)
Republican	.907*** (.108)
Ideology	.274** (.09)
Economy	.043 (.06)
Education	-.01 (.048)
Social Security	.572*** (.095)
Tax Cuts	.393*** (.092)
Gun Control	.300** (.102)
Clinton Approval	.383*** (.079)
P>F	0.00
N	2450

Standard errors in parentheses.

\* p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

Table 2. Shift in the Probability of Voting for George Bush when Perception of Candidates shifts from Favorable to Unfavorable Response on a Series of Character Variables.

Action	Probability Shift	Standard Error
Bush Lies	-.17	.04
Gore Lies	.12	.05
Bush Unfair	-.21	.04
Gore Unfair	.19	.04
Bush Lies and is Unfair	-.37	.04
Gore Lies and is Unfair	.30	.05