

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Monday November 6, 2006
Contact: John Neffinger (202) 669-6365

Joint Harvard-KNP Communications Study Finds Candidates' Charisma is Best Predictor of Election Winners

Brief visual impressions of a candidate speaking at a podium are more accurate in predicting the outcome of elections than incumbency and on par with campaign spending levels, finds a new study jointly funded by **Harvard's Kennedy School of Government** and **KNP Communications** and supported by the **University of Chicago**, **Dartmouth**, and **Michigan's Institute for Social Research (ISR)**.

"We found that snap decisions based on perceived charisma are a good predictor of election outcomes," says study co-author **Daniel J. Benjamin**, "But you need to measure charisma with silent video clips rather than with sound," he adds, because hearing the candidates talk "disrupts people's ability to judge the non-verbal cues that really matter." Benjamin and his co-author **Jesse M. Shapiro** conducted the study at Harvard when both were PhD students there. Benjamin is now a fellow at Michigan's ISR and faculty member at Dartmouth, while Shapiro is at the University of Chicago. Their study is being released this week as a working paper of the **National Bureau of Economic Research** (www.NBER.org).

The study showed volunteers silent, 10-second clips of the two major-party candidates for governor from state races across the country over the past 15 years, making sure that volunteers did not recognize either candidate. When asked to predict which of the two candidates would win the election, volunteers correctly predicted the outcome of the race about six times out of ten, far more often than chance, a highly statistically significant outcome.

The study found that the accuracy of predictions based solely on silent video clips was greater than predictions based on which candidate was an incumbent and information about the prevailing economic conditions at the time of the election. Predictions based on campaign spending were just slightly more accurate than charisma at the study's sample size, though the numbers suggested that a larger sample would likely find the charisma factor more predictive.

The findings also underscore the importance of charisma, as distinct from party affiliations, policy positions or convincing rhetoric, in winning elections.

"It may be difficult to describe the factors that determine a politician's charisma," says Benjamin. "But it can be measured by how people react to a politician in the absence of information about policy positions. Our study clearly shows that reactions to even small amounts of visual information are highly informative about charisma."

For the study, Benjamin and Shapiro showed 264 participants, almost all Harvard undergraduates, 10-second video clips of the major party candidates in 58 gubernatorial elections from 1988 to 2002. The clips were taken from C-SPAN DVDs of gubernatorial debates. The participants rated the personal attributes of the candidates, guessed their party affiliation, and

predicted which of the two would win. Most of the clips were silent, but some had sound, allowing participants to compare their policy positions. Participants were not shown clips from states they grew up in, and were asked if they were familiar with any of the candidates. If they were, their predictions were eliminated from the analysis.

“Although a large body of existing research shows that candidates’ policy positions have a powerful influence on *individual* voting behavior, our study finds that ratings based solely on short selections of silent video are highly predictive of the overall vote share in gubernatorial contests,” says Benjamin.

He notes the large literature in social psychology establishing that judgments about other people based on ‘thin slices’ – exposures as brief as a few seconds – are highly predictive of reactions to much longer exposures.

The study was supported by the **Taubman Center for State and Local Government** at Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government and by KNP Communications, a political consulting firm that used the findings to develop a tool called the Virtual Primary™ to help political organizations and donors predict at the beginning of the campaign which candidates would be successful in the end.

“This study confirms something we all know in our gut – that we know a leader when we see one,” said KNP Communications partner **John Neffinger**. “Like it or not, public speakers in general and politicians in particular need to know how to look and act the part of a leader if they want to be successful in the public arena.”

Links:

A .pdf file of the full study is available at:

www.nber.org

A demonstration exercise drawn from the study is available online at

www.knpcommunications.com/virtualprimary/visualvotingstudy.shtml

More information on Dan Benjamin is available at:

<http://personal.psc.isr.umich.edu/~danben/>

More information about Jesse Shapiro is available at:

<http://home.uchicago.edu/~jmshapir/>

More information about KNP Communications is available at:

www.knpcommunications.com
