

Candidate Authenticity and the Iowa Caucus

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Abstract

Candidate ‘authenticity’ has become a frequent explanation of electoral performance. Yet its study in electoral research has been largely neglected. Building on recent work, we test its relationship with candidate support in the 2020 Iowa Democratic Caucus through a survey of likely Caucus goers. The Caucus offers an ideal setting — a contest focused on candidates and their personalities, in a context having far-reaching political implications. We demonstrate that authenticity perceptions played an important role in individual vote intentions. Indeed, for Biden and Buttigieg perceptions of their authenticity were strongly associated with vote intention even when controlling for other established traits. Warren, unlike the others, benefited indirectly, because her authenticity triggered substantial support among female voters. The performance of the authenticity trait, direct and indirect, points to its pivotal potential in the 2020 presidential campaign.

Keywords: Authenticity, Candidate Traits, Democratic Party, Iowa, US Presidential

Primaries and Caucuses, Voting

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1. Introduction:

Here we test the relationship between perceptions of authenticity and candidate support at the 2020 Iowa Democratic Caucus. The degree to which political candidates are perceived as ‘authentic’ has been frequently used in both academic and popular explanations of their electoral performance in contests across the world. In candidate-centric electoral systems, such as the United States, this is particularly true. However, despite its frequent invocation, it remains largely a buzzword that has not been adequately scrutinized by empirical research.

In America, political candidates’ authenticity – or the perception of it at least – has been a frequent boon or hindrance. In the 2000 Presidential election, Al Gore’s authenticity was called into question with accusations that his public performances were masking a different “true self,” in contrast to George W. Bush whose backstage interactions with journalists gave the impression that his frontstage persona was not very different from his “true self” (Jamieson and Waldman, 2003, p. 28). Authenticity also played a part in the narrative of the 2016 presidential election with Hillary Clinton being called out for having an authenticity problem, as opposed to Donald Trump’s apparent authenticity advantage (Greenberg, 2015). In her 2017 biography, Clinton herself (in Enli and Rosenberg, 2018, p. 3) articulated the view that her perceived authenticity deficit was an important factor in her defeat:

‘This whole topic of ‘being real’ can feel very silly (...). Yet the issues of authenticity and likability had an impact on the most consequential election of our lifetime, and it will have impact on future ones.’

While there is some evidence that perceived authenticity mattered for first-time voters in this contest (see Sweetser, 2017), one cannot retrospectively test the impact of authenticity perceptions on the 2016, or previous presidential elections. However, advances in the field have given us the tools to examine it in more recent contests.

The Iowa Caucus offers an ideal setting for such research. Firstly, because the caucus restricts itself to members of one party – Democrats in this case – it provides a special opportunity to explore the role of traits free from partisan bias. Put another way, we are able to explore the impact of traits, such as authenticity, while literally holding the impact of party support constant. Moreover, it is heavily focused on individual candidates and their personalities, in a context having far-reaching political implications. It represents the first contestation for presidential hopefuls and, by doing better than expected, candidates can gain vital public visibility, increase their public prominence and thus the potential to build political support (Bartels, 1990). For Barack Obama in 2008, winning Iowa raised his profile and, most importantly, perceptions of the viability of his campaign, while simultaneously stalling Clinton’s (Redlawsk et al., 2011). Hence, Iowa can set the tone for the campaign season, providing vital momentum to some and taking it away from others. Moreover, in many ways Iowa is a representative state (Lewis-Beck and Squire, 2009), or to put it another way ‘essentially the most average of states’ (Redlawsk et al., 2011, p. 137) which further adds to its usefulness as a case study.

One of the notable features of the 2020 Iowa Caucus was that Pete Buttigieg claimed what was for many a surprise victory while the eventual Democratic nominee and winner of 2020 election, Joe Biden, did not appear to hold much promise, coming in at 4th place in vote share. The confusion arising from the counting issues and thus the prolonged declaration of the winner meant that the Caucus might not have had its usual national impact (see Goldmacher and Corasaniti, 2020). However, since the counting issues had not been foreseen before the contest, it seems reasonable to expect that its voters would have presumed the contest would carry its normal weight.

Authenticity is particularly intriguing among the frontrunning candidates. It has been observed that it is easier to be perceived as authentic while in opposition, since one is less likely

to be faced with tough choices and the need to compromise (Campbell, 2017). Yet, in the case of Biden, despite being Vice-President for 8 years he left office with ‘a reputation as [being] authentic, a rare attribute for any politician, let alone a longtime establishment figure’ (Gambino, 2017). One also had two candidates whose supposed ‘authenticity’ was widely considered to be among their strong assets: Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. Did this authenticity aid them in gathering the Iowa support they received?

Using an original survey of likely Democratic Party Caucus goers in Iowa, our results show that perceptions of the authenticity of candidates played an important role in predicting one’s vote choice. For both Biden and Buttigieg, it was the only trait examined that showed a statistically significant, direct association with whether respondents were planning on giving their first-preference vote to them. Importantly, for these candidates, authenticity outperformed other often-used traits in the literature. For Warren, the leading female candidate in the contest, authenticity perceptions operated indirectly. Although it did not play a role among male voters for predicting their stated first-preference vote, it did for female voters. However, the trait of competence was her strong suit overall. For Sanders meanwhile, his authenticity did not appear to ultimately matter much, given that even those who did not vote for him largely perceived him to be authentic. Building on recent research, this contribution highlights the role of authenticity in electoral contexts.

2. Literature Review:

The trait of candidate authenticity has until recently been mostly overlooked in the political science literature, especially in quantitative research. As far back as 2004, Loudon and McCauliff (2004, p. 90) remarked that – academically – authenticity was more likely ‘to be found in rhetorical traditions than in social science inquiry’ with part of the reason being its indeterminate meaning and whether it could be captured empirically. Nevertheless, the rise of so-called ‘amateur politicians’ has led to renewed scholarly interest in the topic, with a growing

literature that seeks to define authenticity and demonstrate its distinctiveness as a candidate trait.

Broadly, authenticity as a concept relates to the intuitive ‘realness’ or ‘trueness to origins’ of the object or person being discussed (Buendgens-Kosten, 2014). When referring to individuals, an authentic person is one who is ‘true to themselves’ as well as open and transparent in their views. Authentic politicians should be consistent in their core values, never changing these lightly or abandoning them for political expediency (Jones, 2016, pp. 490–493). In one sense, the rise of the term can be thought of as a reaction to the perception that the political class is ‘fake’. An authentic candidate does not deceive voters by hiding their ‘true self’, e.g., saying what they think people want to hear rather than what they truly believe (Jones, 2016, p. 496; Umbach and Humphrey, 2018, p. 68). In this way, its innovation in political campaigns often sends as much a message about an opposition candidate as it does the candidate labelled authentic, being used to ‘criticize hypocrisy, stiltedness, and too much distance from the common folk’ (Hagel 2017: 221). Thus, authentic candidates may be more relatable to voters. As this human side of politicians has perhaps increased over the second half of the twentieth century, so could the expectation by citizens that their politicians should be authentic (Valgarðsson et al., 2020). Yet the literature on authenticity in political research has lagged behind this expectation.

The relative lack of such literature may also be a result of its conflation with existing traits used in electoral studies. We feel it is important to distinguish perceptions of authenticity from other traits, most notably integrity. While politicians who are perceived as possessing integrity display high standards of morality, this is not a necessary component of authenticity given that authentic individuals may be wedded to either worthy or dubious principles (Jones, 2016; Stiers et al., 2021). Likewise, while honesty may come into authenticity, it is not necessarily the honesty of telling the truth but more the honesty of speaking one’s mind freely

using strategies such as spontaneity, intimacy, ordinariness, and conviction (Enli and Rosenberg, 2018; Stiers et al., 2021). As Fieschi (2019, p. 150) puts it, ‘One’s measure is taken not by what one says, but what immediate conviction one can display. That conviction is taken as the proof that you belong, because you are authentic’.

As such, populist politicians have come to be associated with authenticity. These politicians may lack the expertise or knowledge to be considered competent – another frequently cited important candidate trait – and instead rely on claims of authenticity. Here, their message of ‘going against the norms’ when telling their ‘truths,’ frankly, even boldly, at some possible political risk, helps to distinguish them from more established figures of the political class. Nevertheless, it has value to remark that authenticity is not the exclusive preserve of populists, since many mainstream politicians have been reported as possessing the trait, including Biden as noted previously.

These theoretical developments on political authenticity have been accompanied by some limited empirical survey research. Brewer et al (2014) showed, in a sample of Delaware residents, that when asked what they thought an authentic politician was, they came up with phrases such as ‘trustworthy’, ‘honest’, ‘true to themselves’ and ‘real’ for “authentic,” versus ‘fake’, ‘pandering’ and ‘telling people what they want to hear’ for “inauthentic.” Thus, these respondents’ perceptions reveal an overlap with the theoretical literature. Moreover, they were presented a scale assessing how authentic – and conversely phony – politicians in general were, as well as Barack Obama and Mitt Romney in particular. Importantly, they found that, in addition to demographic factors, partisanship is used as a screen through which individuals evaluate politicians’ authenticity. This finding was echoed in an analysis of Trump’s and Clinton’s perceived authenticity in a 2016 national sample of first-time voters (Browning and Sweetser, 2020).

Outside of the United States, Enli and Rosenberg (2018) measured authenticity by asking Norwegian respondents to rank candidates in the order of those they thought were the most ‘real’ ; in addition, they asked respondents how important it was for them when deciding to vote that politicians ‘came across as being themselves’. Their results showed that 67% of respondents responded that this was important and that populist politicians were more likely – though not exclusively so – to be thought of as authentic, again echoing the theoretical literature. This latter finding may be linked to experimental research from the United States that demonstrates that the use of politically incorrect language – which is frequently invoked by populist politicians – can boost authenticity perceptions through making the user appear less strategic (Rosenblum et al., 2020).

While these papers focus on explaining authenticity perceptions, Stiers et al (2021) instead use authenticity as an explanatory variable for analyzing the vote choice. Measured with a battery of questions that load strongly onto a single factor and concentrating primarily on party leaders, they show using comparative data from Western Europe and the United States that, when individuals perceive politicians to be more authentic, they are more likely to evaluate that candidate positively and to express a voting preference for that politicians’ party, even after controlling for partisanship and a range of other trait perceptions.

Therefore, the literature demonstrates that authenticity is a measurable and meaningful political concept, is important to voters, and is able to trigger electoral rewards for candidates who are perceived as authentic. Research on the electoral role of authenticity is however still in its infancy, with a recent call that such research ‘should focus on the significance of perceived authenticity or inauthenticity and its antecedents in the context of people’s voting decisions’ (Luebke, 2021, p. 648).

We take up this call in the context of US primary elections and caucuses, specifically in the run up to one of the most prominent caucuses: the Iowa Democratic Caucus. While our

primary interest is to examine whether individuals were more likely to state a vote intention for candidates if they perceived them to be more authentic, we also investigate the role of other candidate traits. In the next section, we detail the dataset and measures we use in our study. This is followed by a presentation of our results. After carrying out additional tests to ensure the robustness of our findings, we conclude with a discussion of the study's implications.

3. Data and methods:

To participate in the Iowa Democratic Caucus, one must be a registered Democrat, a process open to citizens up to the night of the caucus itself. To target this population we partnered with the Iowa Caucus Panel Survey (University of Delaware, David Redlawsk, administrator). We rely in particular on wave 2, fielded December 2019-January 2020 among likely Caucus goers, $n = 479$.¹ Of this group, 84% identified as Democrats and 15% as independents.² The majority of these respondents (448) completed the survey online, with phone interviews carried out among a small number (31) to increase the retention of older voters. (These data are weighted to the age, gender, income, education, race and Hispanic profile of Democrat caucus goers.)

For our dependent variable, we draw on the following question asking respondents to rank order the candidates.

“Please vote for up to five of the candidates running in the Iowa Caucuses by clicking on the appropriate buttons. The candidate who is your first choice and you currently plan to vote for at the Caucus, if any, should be selected under the “1st Choice” column. Your second choice candidate should be selected under the “2nd Choice” column, and so on, up to five choices.

If you are currently undecided and cannot rank the candidates, please click on “Undecided” in the “1st Choice” column and you need not use any other columns.”

¹ 98% of these had already registered to vote when surveyed during the first wave.

² In our analyses, we drop the 4 individuals that identify with another party as well as the single independent that leans towards the Republicans so that our sample is composed purely of individuals who identify as either Democrats or are Democrat-leaning (68) or neutral (6) independents. This aids both quality control and ensures a similar partisan composition of our sample, an important feature of our study.

We concentrate on first-preference vote choices and estimate a series of logistic regression models to predict whether respondents would (1) or would not (0) give their first-preference votes in the Caucus to Biden, Buttigieg, Sanders or Warren, respectively. (The sample size for the other candidates was too low to generate reliable estimates.)³ For the explanatory variables in our models, we capture a number of different factors expected to affect vote choice. Our main interest is on testing the role of candidate authenticity, and we measure this drawing on a recently developed battery of candidate authenticity items shown to have both reliability and validity across different international settings, including the United States (Stiers et al., 2021). Respondents are presented with the following statements and asked to what extent they agree with it on a 1-7 Likert scale from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”⁴.

1. On the key issues of the day, we know where [candidate x] stands.
2. [Candidate x] won't change [his/her] opinion just to get votes.
3. [Candidate x] is not afraid to speak out.
4. [Candidate x] says what [he/she] means.
5. When [candidate x] gives a speech, it's the 'straight stuff'.
6. [Candidate x] behaves the same in public as in private.

Table C1 (Supplementary Appendix) displays the rotated loadings from an exploratory factor analysis of these items and demonstrates that each loads strongly onto the one factor, with a value of at least 0.75. Moreover, for each candidate the Cronbach's Alpha is higher than 0.90, indicating a strong fit. [The last item on whether the candidate is perceived to be the same in public as in private has a larger percentage of missing values – between 23-31% for each candidate – which may bias the results; however when we repeat the factor analysis with just the other 5 items (Table C2, Supplementary Appendix) we receive similarly robust results.]

³ Unweighted first-preference vote intentions in the sample were 102 for Buttigieg, 92 for Warren, 84 for Sanders, 66 for Biden, 45 for Klobuchar, 20 for Booker, 17 for Yang and 12 for Steyer. All other candidates had recorded first-preference vote intentions in single digits, and just 22 respondents were uncommitted/undecided.

⁴ See Supplementary Appendix A for a breakdown of responses, as well as summary statistics

In order that the item battery, as used here, does not have more components than the other traits we detail below, we subset two of these items to form the index in our main analyses (See Sullivan and Feldman, 1979 on desirable properties of multiple indicator models). This is done to level the playing field so to speak, giving each trait an equality in that regard. Theoretically, we believe the above items 2 ('won't change opinion') and 4 ('says what means') capture the essence of candidate authenticity. Empirically, the factor analyses just detailed show that these two items load strongly on the more developed 'authenticity' factor, across all candidates⁵.

We are interested, further, in how other candidate traits may have come into play. Were certain traits owned more by some presidential candidates and how did this affect vote choice? The traits literature on American presidential candidates has offered different classifications. An exhaustive study by Kessel (2004), who coded the American National Election Study (ANES) open-ended items beginning in 1952, came up with a seven-fold classification: general, record-incumbency, experience, management, intelligence, trust, and personality. In another investigation employing factor analyses of ANES responses, Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk (1986) found the following five-category breakdown: competence, integrity, reliability, charisma, and purely personal. Publishing at the same time on the same issue, Kinder (1986) offers a somewhat reduced typology: competence, integrity, leadership, and empathy. Lewis-Beck et al. (2008, p. 49), focusing on the 2004 presidential contest, provides two traits that distinguished President-elect Bush: 'decisive' and 'honest.'

In sum, there exists a rich literature on American presidential candidate traits, with some overlap but also with distinct conclusions. In our Caucus study, respondents were asked

⁵ Further factor analyses using just these two items (Table C3, Supplementary Appendix) indicate a good fit. While the Cronbach's Alpha are slightly lower than when the five- or six-item batteries are used, they are still, respectively, strong at a magnitude of 0.83 or higher for all candidates. Moreover, the two-item index correlates strongly at 0.94 or higher with both the five-item and six-item index for all candidates (Table C4, Supplementary Appendix). We also present analyses in the Supplementary Appendices H and I showing that the main results for authenticity remain robust to using the five-item battery.

to what extent the candidates embodied character traits often identified in other electoral surveys (Holian and Prysby, 2015; Miller and Shanks, 1996). Three leading traits—competence, integrity and empathy—could be evaluated here with multi-item indicators (so paralleling our authenticity measure).⁶

Turning to the specific items used, we have, for competence, responses to the terms ‘knowledgeable’ and ‘intelligent’; for empathy, we have responses to ‘really cares about people like you’ and ‘compassionate’; and for integrity we have responses to ‘moral’ and ‘trustworthy’. Five-point scales from ‘not well at all’ (recoded 1) to ‘extremely well’ (recoded 5) were employed for the individual items. From these items we built additive indices for each trait. As was the case for the authenticity index, exploratory factor analyses support previous literature, showing that these items load strongly onto their respective factors (Tables C6 – C8, Supplementary Appendix).

Finally, we examine the role of socio-demographics and political ideology in predicting vote intention. These items are noteworthy, in that the responses are to questions fielded in wave 1, so rendering them more exogenous, i.e., less subject to reciprocal causation and its risk of bias. These variables, and their measures, are as follows: age (30 and under, 31-45; 46-64; 65+), gender (male/female), educational attainment (high school graduate or less/technical, trade or vocational school after high school; some college, no 4-year degree; college graduate; post-graduate training or professional schooling after college) and region (Eastern cities; East Central; Central; Des Moines Area; West). As already mentioned, the sample consists of Democrats or Democrat-leaning independents, thus essentially holding constant the party identification variable. To capture ideological differences within this grouping, we use responses to whether respondents consider themselves to be neither liberal nor conservative,

⁶ Summary statistics for all of our indices can be found in Table C5 (authenticity) and C9 (other traits) of the Supplementary Appendix.

liberal or very liberal⁷. For modelling purposes, we assume the influence pattern of these independent variables follows a standard voting behavior model, suggested by the ‘funnel of causality’ argument (Campbell et al., 1960; Lewis-Beck et al., 2008, chapter 2). Thus, these demographic and ideological variables will be those initially introduced into our equations.

4. Results:

To begin, we present descriptive statistics for the items forming our authenticity battery in our main analyses. Figure 1 presents the percentage of respondents – once those who answer ‘don’t know’ are excluded – that either agree or strongly agree that the authenticity statements apply to each of our four candidates under consideration. Sanders was by far perceived as the most authentic with over 80% of respondents agreeing that each of these terms applied to him. Moreover, he was the only candidate where ‘strongly agree’ responses outweighed ‘agree’ responses. Warren was perceived as the next most authentic candidate, a noteworthy finding suggesting that by no means do these voters assign authenticity exclusively to male candidates, with 70% agreeing that she ‘says what she means’. Responses for Biden and Buttigieg are closer together to each other, though – like Warren - Biden also has a notable gap in the aggregate responses between the two items.

⁷ There are an additional 8 individuals who consider themselves to be conservative or very conservative. While including these in descriptive analyses, we exclude them from our regression analyses as the sample size is too small to be able to calculate reliable estimates.

Figure 1: % Agree/strongly agree with authenticity items (Excluding DK)

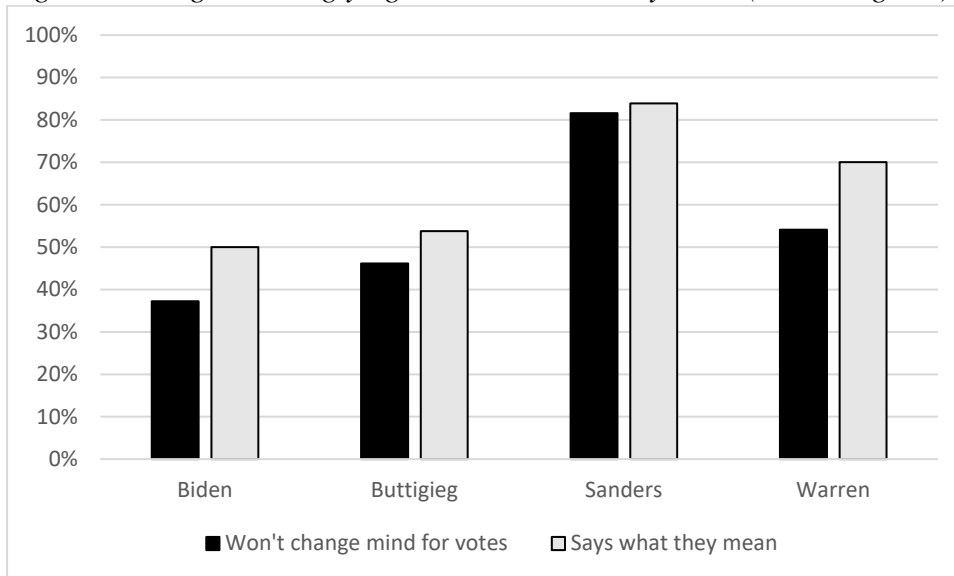
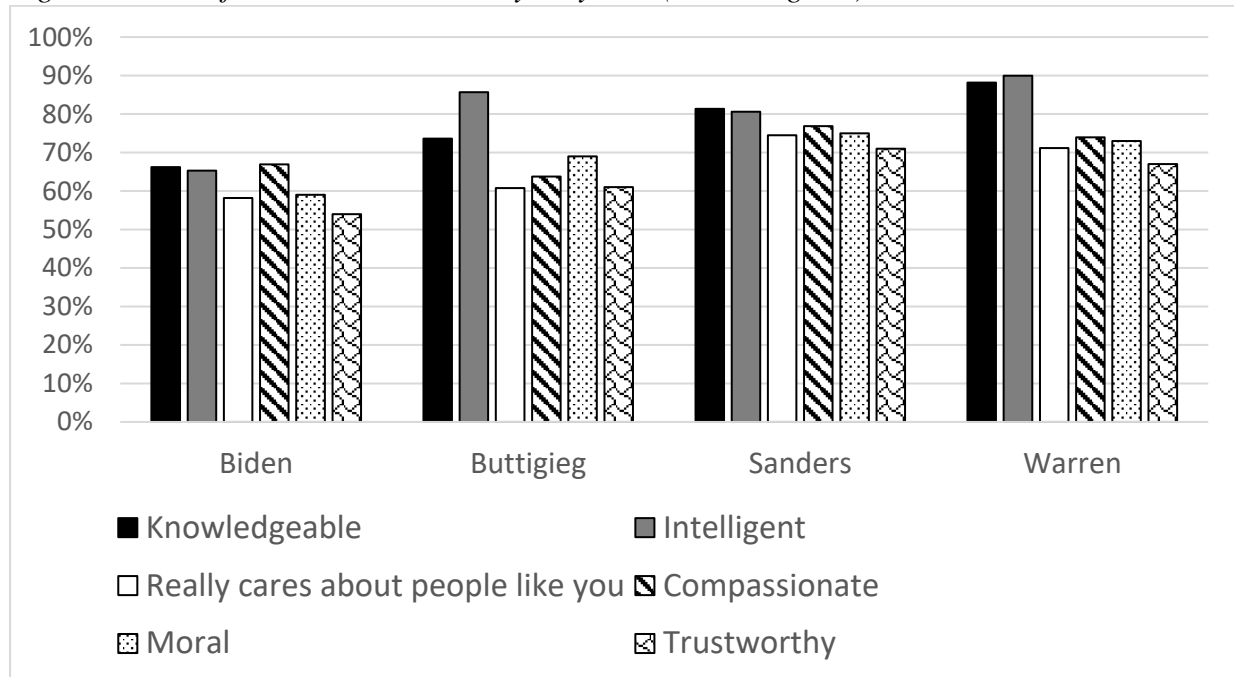


Figure 2 focuses on the other traits by presenting the percentage of respondents who considered that the traits applied extremely or very well to each candidate, again following the exclusion of don't know responses⁸. Warren was perceived as the most competent, with almost 90% percent of respondents noting that both the terms 'knowledgeable' and 'intelligent' describe her. While Buttigieg performed strongly on being perceived as 'intelligent', the percentage of respondents who deemed him 'knowledgeable' was notably lower. Sanders was perceived the best on both the integrity and empathy items, with Warren being a very close second place. It is worth commenting that Biden's score on 'compassionate' was higher than for 'really cares about people like you'. Indeed, though Biden performed comparatively weaker on these traits than the other three leading candidates in the Caucus, the gap between the traits he performed best and worst is generally smaller than those seen for the others, suggesting a greater level of consistency. Less cautious analysts might even be tempted to say that the ready characterization of Biden as an "average Joe" is not far off.

⁸ See Supplementary Appendix B for a full breakdown of responses, as well as summary statistics.

Figure 2: Traits fit candidates extremely/very well (Excluding DK)



Before we carry out our regression analyses, it is important to consider the relationship that these traits may have with each other. We know that trait perceptions can be highly correlated, and if authenticity in particular is highly correlated with the other traits it may lead to problems of multicollinearity. Previous research, though, has pointed to authenticity as being distinct from the more established traits (Stiers et al., 2021). After correlating these trait indices with each other⁹, we find that authenticity is moderately correlated with these other traits, as we might expect, though not at magnitudes of more than 0.68 across all candidates. The one exception is for Buttigieg where authenticity correlates with both integrity and empathy at 0.78. What appears to be more serious is an extremely high correlation between the integrity and empathy trait perceptions for all candidates, at between 0.82-0.87.

Therefore, as a stronger test, we carry out a number of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) per candidate¹⁰. Firstly we test whether our two pre-conceived items for each trait per candidate show an appropriate fit in a 4-factor model. While for each candidate the SMRM is

⁹ See Supplementary Appendix D

¹⁰ See Supplementary Appendix E for full tables

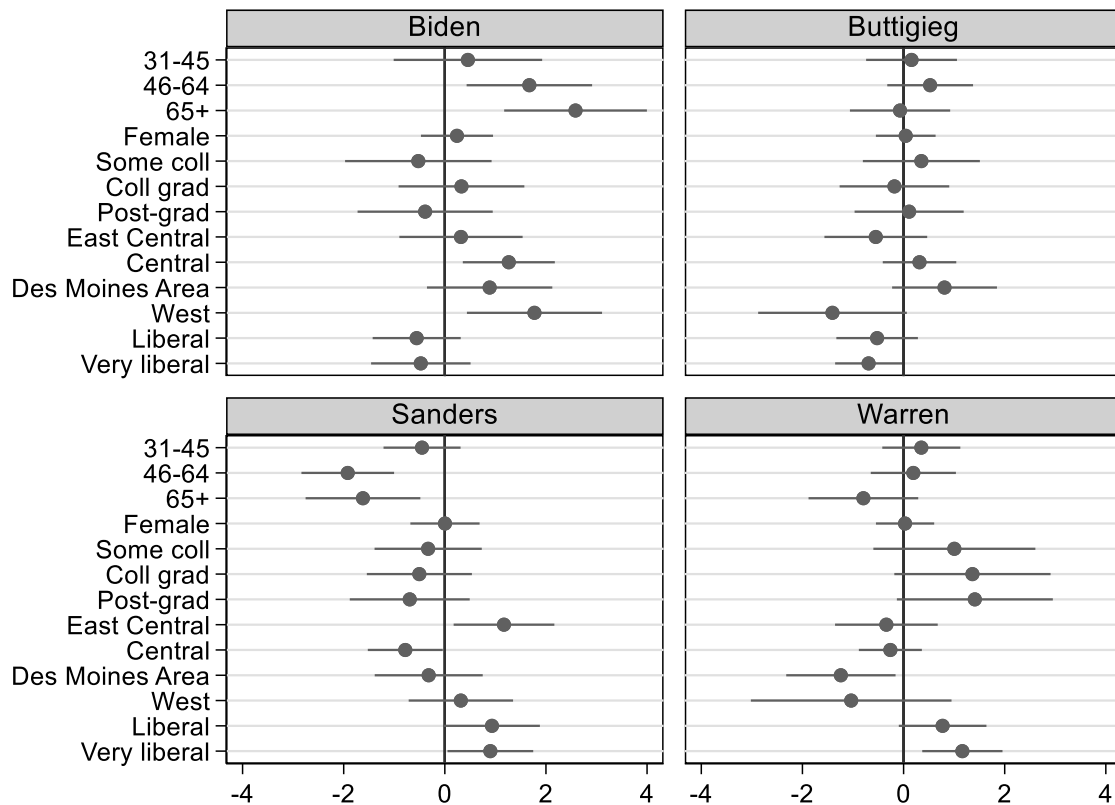
far below the 0.08 threshold and the coefficient for each candidate approaches 1 – both indicating a good fit – the factor covariances between the empathy and integrity items are all above 0.85. This thus supports the findings from the highly correlated indices. We therefore carry out another set of CFA per candidate in which we drop the integrity item and test for a three-factor solution. In all of these the SMRM remains low – in fact decreasing for Biden, Sanders and Warren – and there are no cases of covariances between the indices at 0.85 or above. As a final test, we test for the possibility that – rather than respondents having distinctive perceptions of the candidates on different traits – that all these traits could be reduced to a single factor by carrying out a CFA whereby we model all of the trait items as belonging to the same factor. However, for all candidates, the model fit worsens substantially, and indeed for both Sanders and Warren the SMRM is above 0.08 indicating that a single-factor model would be completely inappropriate.

Thus, the evidence strongly supports our prior assumptions that voters have distinctive perceptions of the candidates across different traits, with the exception of the high correlations between the integrity and empathy measures. In subsequent analyses, we therefore exclude integrity from our models, and – in addition to authenticity – proceed with including the competence and empathy measures. These two traits fit neatly into Fiorina’s (1981, p. 151) breakdown of traits into ‘instrumental,’ e.g., competence, or ‘affective,’ e.g., empathy. These traits, noteworthy in American traits literature are, indeed, the two leading traits in the investigation by Clarke et al. (2004, p. 30/31) of leadership images in the United Kingdom. (We provide additional analyses in Supplementary Appendix K in which we substitute the empathy measure for the integrity measure, and we demonstrate that doing so does not affect our results.)

Having established the appropriateness of our measures, we now move on to our multivariate analyses regressing first-preference vote-choices for each of the four candidates

on socio-demographics, political ideology and traits. Figure 3 plots the coefficients when just the demographic variables and ideology are included, on grounds of causal priority (see Supplementary Appendix F for the estimated models themselves). Particularly notable is the fact that Biden and Sanders had opposing predictors. While Biden performed better among older age categories, Sanders performed better among younger age categories. This reflected a pattern seen in national surveys around the same time (Gramlich, 2020), one that would continue throughout the primaries (Sachs, 2020). The pattern of regional voting roughly followed the pattern in 2016 Iowa Caucus voting, with the more westward regions exhibiting more support for less extreme candidates (Cohen, 2016). For example, Sanders was significantly stronger in the East of the state, while Biden shined in the Central region. There were no significant gender or education differences for any of the candidates, although the Warren coefficients stand out for her consistently positive signs on college education. The ideology of respondents correlated with candidate ideology. Sanders and Warren were both more likely to be supported by liberals and Buttigieg less likely (significantly so for ‘very liberal’ respondents). Biden meanwhile saw no significant advantage or disadvantage based on respondents’ ideology.

Figure 3: First-preference vote choice logistic regression – demographics models

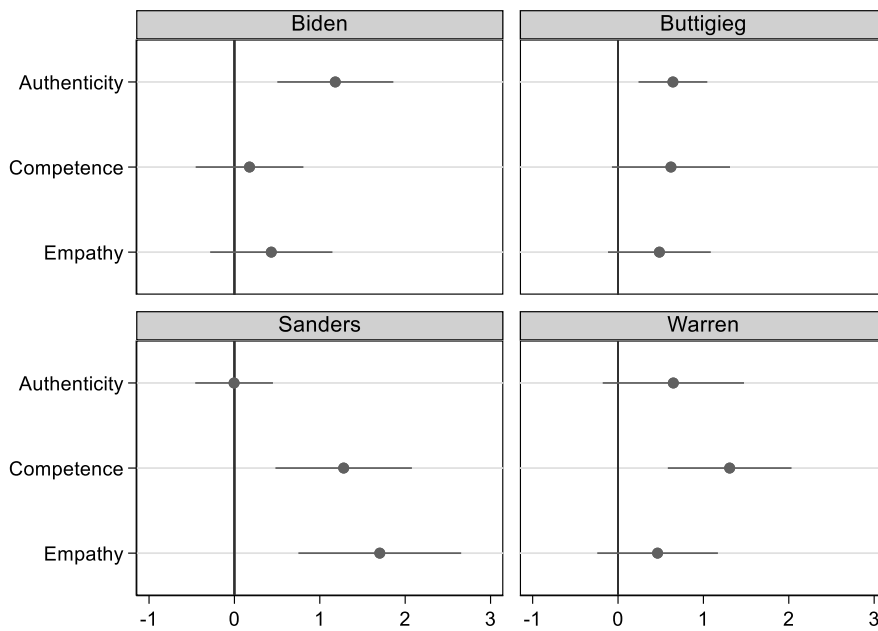


Reference categories: Age: 18-30; Education: High school and under; Region: Eastern Cities
 Ideology: Neither liberal nor conservative. Coefficients are plotted with 95% confidence intervals.

What about the role of character traits? Figure 4 displays coefficients for the authenticity, competence and empathy perceptions of each candidate, controlling for demographics and ideology. For both Biden and Buttigieg, authenticity was the only one of these traits that mattered (i.e., the 95% confidence intervals did not capture zero). Indeed, accounting for these traits removes the significant age differences seen for Biden in Figure 3. For Warren, perceptions of her competence were the single trait associated with a higher likelihood of intending to vote for her. Meanwhile, both perceptions of Sanders’ competence and empathy were associated with a greater likelihood of intending to vote for him, though authenticity did not matter.

The lack of statistical significance for the authenticity variable in the Sanders model merits explication. Clearly, Sanders had been perceived as the most authentic candidate among respondents. But he was also the candidate with the lowest variation in responses. (Recall Figure 1, where over 80 % of respondents see him as authentic.) In a statistical sense, this creates a situation of low statistical power, with its difficulty of distinguishing real effects; a particular difficulty stems from the fact that the perception of authenticity here is virtually a constant rather than a variable; thus, when added to the regression equation, its weight merely goes into the constant, leaving its slope coefficient indistinguishable from zero. (For discussion of this restricted variance problem in other electoral contests, see Fraile and Lewis-Beck, 2014; Leyden and Lewis-Beck, 2017). Put another way, both those who did and did not give him their first-preference vote choice saw him as highly authentic. For those who intended to vote for him, they almost certainly saw him as authentic, but that was not important to them, compared especially to his empathy and left-wing ideology (see Supplementary Appendix, Table F3, model 3). (We are not able, however, to provide insight into the counterfactual involving whether he may have had a lower number of individuals willing to vote for him if there was greater variation in his authenticity perceptions and fewer voters perceived him as authentic.)

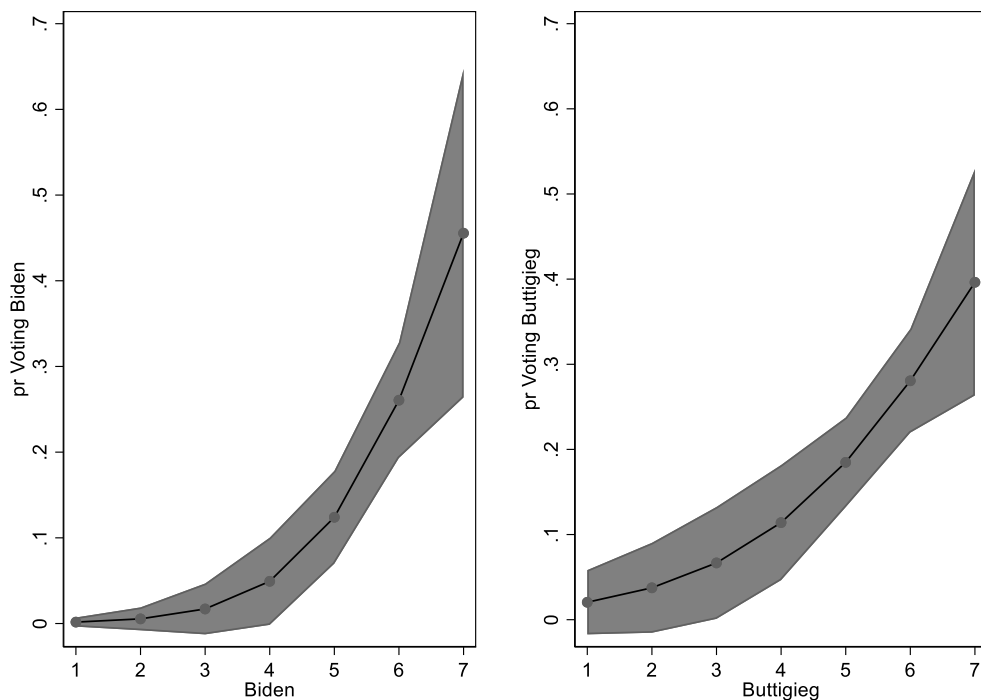
Figure 4: First-preference vote choice logistic regression – traits (demographics/ideology included, but coefficients not displayed)



Coefficients are plotted with 95% confidence intervals.

Having established that authenticity mattered for Biden and Buttigieg, how sizeable were these associations? Figure 5 displays the predicted probabilities of giving one’s first-preference vote to each of these candidates at different points on the authenticity scale, based on the model just discussed. At a point of 5 on the scale, a respondent has a 13% probability of choosing Biden, yet at a point of 7 this increases drastically to 46%. Though of a lesser magnitude, the difference for Buttigieg is still substantial moving from an 18% to a 40% probability at these respective points. These clearly demonstrate that greater perceptions of authenticity can aid one’s electoral chances. We can now say, with respect to these first-preference vote intentions, that authenticity perceptions were of a substantial magnitude for two of the four leading contenders.

Figure 5: First-preference vote choice logistic regression – authenticity margins plot



Coefficients are plotted with 95% confidence intervals.

5. Challenging the Results:

Do these results, showing the comparatively strong role of authenticity, as compared to other traits, withstand challenge? We consider five possible weaknesses. Two have to do with independent variables, namely the measurement of authenticity and the omission of other competing traits. The third has to do with measurement of the dependent variable. The fourth concerns the role of gender and authenticity, in particular whether associations between vote intention and perceived authenticity are conditioned by gender. And the fifth relates to an alternative modelling strategy.

With respect to the first, measurement (in a two-item index) might bias the authenticity coefficient because it is conceptually incomplete. A test for this possibility involves substitution of our more complete five-item index, which we do in Tables H1 to H4 (see Supplementary Appendix), showing that, in fact, it produces the same coefficient pattern, i.e., authenticity is statistically significant for Biden and Buttigieg (with that of Biden somewhat

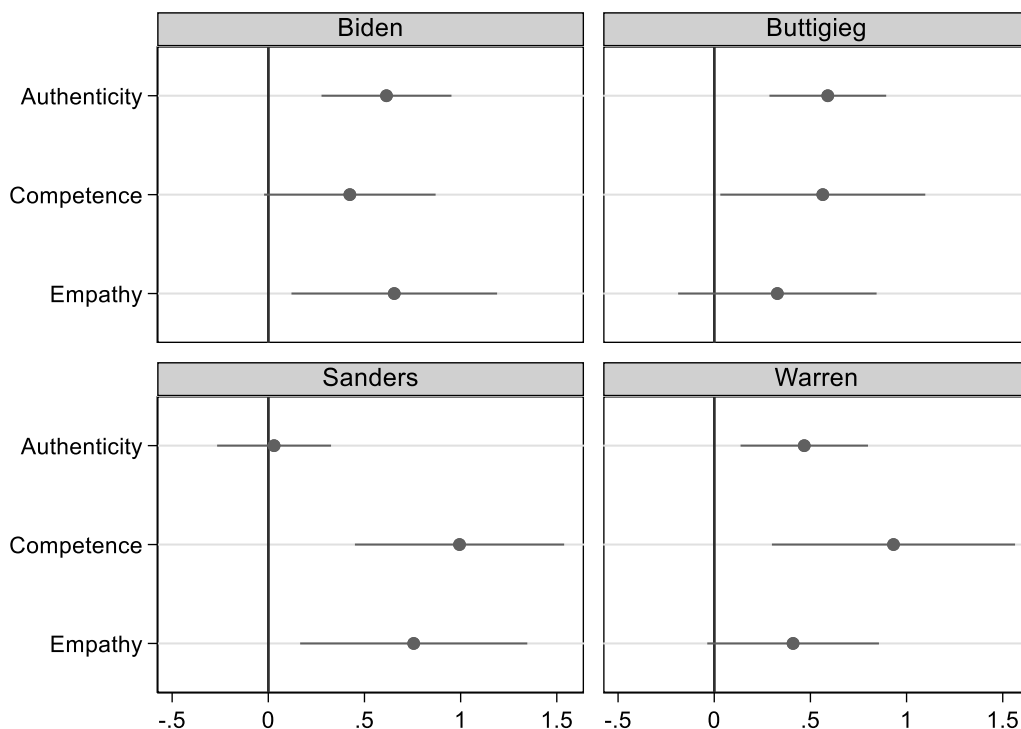
larger) and not statistically significant for Sanders or Warren. Moreover, any bias from the selected two-item index, if there is one, leans slightly in the direction of underestimating, rather than overestimating, authenticity. Thus, the two-item index, so constituted, does not unduly favor its impact when compared to the other traits.

Now we turn to the omitted variables problem, specifically the omission of the leadership variable, which has regularly appeared in the literature (Costa Lobo and Curtice, 2015; Kinder, 1986; Lewis-Beck et al., 2011, pp. 113–125). The variable might be considered especially relevant in the case of Biden, who occupied the important leadership position of Vice-President. Indeed, one might argue that, in his case, the authenticity variable is mostly a proxy for leadership. Fortunately, we have a measure of leadership, although it is only one item (“provides strong leadership”), which is why it has been hitherto excluded. Nevertheless, as a test, it seems useful to include it now, which is done in Tables F1-F4 (see Supplementary Appendix). We observe that the leadership variable lacks statistical significance for all the candidates (except Sanders). Moreover, the authenticity coefficients register negligible substantive changes. Thus, we conclude that the significant relationship between vote intention for Biden/Buttigieg and their perceived authenticity is something real and not the spurious product of leadership. And, as we already noted, the results also remain robust if we substitute the empathy index with an integrity index (which were too highly correlated to include at the same time – see Supplementary Appendix K).

Third, we look at the dependent variable and the question of preference measurement. Thus far, we have concentrated on first-choice preferences. However, second-preferences can also matter in the Caucus contest. If in the first alignment a Caucus voter’s first-preference candidate does not get at least 15% of the vote in the precinct, they are given the opportunity to switch their preference to an alternative candidate. Second-preferences can also signal broader appeal (as they appeared to do for Buttigieg, who ultimately won the caucus.) While a

first-preference candidate might be one’s true preference, a second-preference indicates one’s choice among the remaining candidates should one’s preferred candidate not be viable. Hence, one may expect candidate traits to play a role, albeit more muted, in this second choice, as well as the first choice. To test this possibility, we recode the dependent variable, in order to indicate whether the candidate is a first- or second-preference versus otherwise. Figure 6 displays the coefficients for the three traits, in full models (see Tables G1-G4, Supplementary Appendix). All the traits that were significant for predicting first-preference vote intention remain important. As well, authenticity becomes important for Warren, in addition to Buttigieg and Biden, who still maintains authenticity coefficient leads, in terms of impact, when compared to its impact for the other candidates. Also, for Biden, empathy becomes important, suggesting the greater breadth of his traits appeal¹¹.

Figure 6: First/second preference vote choice logistic regression – traits (demographics/ideology included, but coefficients not displayed)



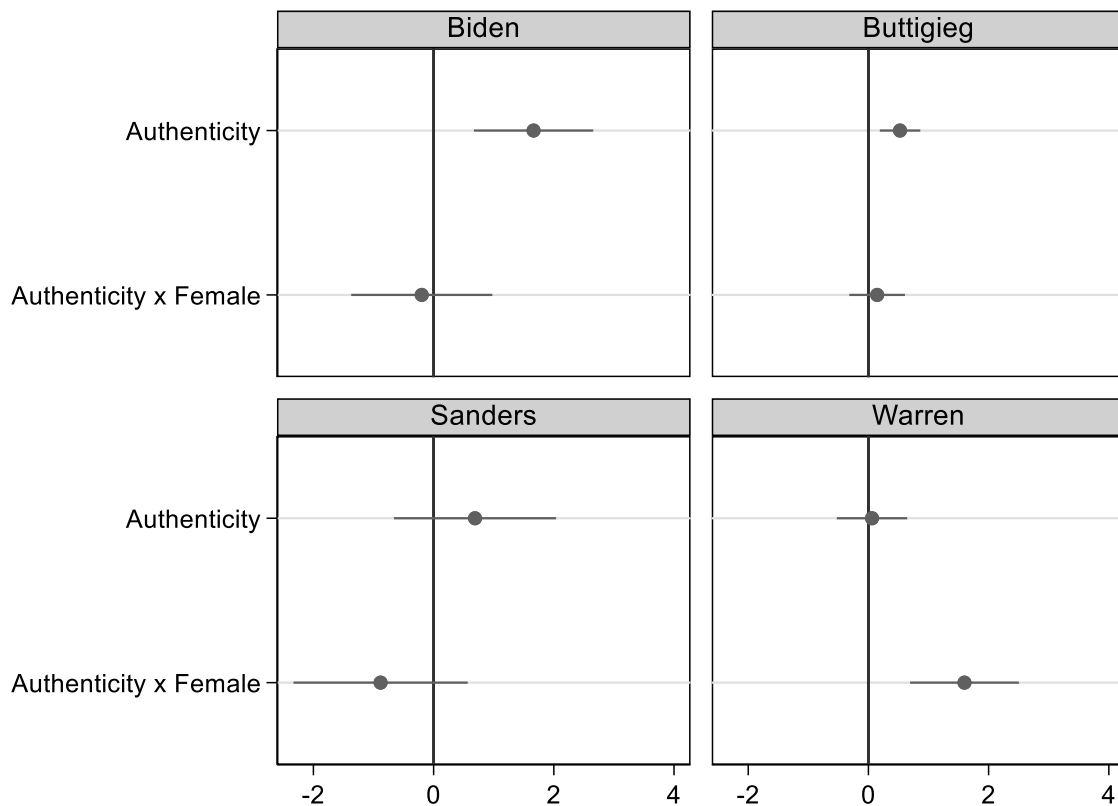
Coefficients are plotted with 95% confidence intervals.

¹¹ When leadership is additionally inserted, the statistical significance of empathy disappears while leadership displays significance at the $p < 0.05$ level.

Fourthly, we consider the role of gender and authenticity. At the time of the Iowa Democratic Caucus, there were two major female candidates in contention— Senator Amy Klobuchar and Senator Elizabeth Warren. The number of respondents backing Klobuchar in our study were too small to permit reliable estimates. However, such was not the case for Warren. As we observed in our introductory analysis, she was viewed as highly authentic, second only to Sanders in that regard, clearly suggesting that authenticity is not “owned” by male candidates. Moreover, as just noted above, once the dependent variable includes second-choice as well as first-choice vote intentions, the trait of authenticity has a direct, statistically significant impact on vote intention for Warren. This opens up the question on whether authenticity and gender are somehow working together (or indeed in opposition). An important hypothesis, then, which we can test for, is whether authenticity matters more for female voters when the candidate is a woman. We explore this possibility in Figure 7, which bases itself on the first-preference regressions estimated for Figure 4, but now including an interaction term (Authenticity x Gender), in each of the four candidate equations¹². Observe that, for the Warren equation, the interaction term does register significance, and in the expected direction whereby greater authenticity perceptions among female voters are associated with a greater probability of having a Warren vote intention. Turning to all three of the male candidates, we see no significance for the interaction term. Thus, we can conclude that authenticity and gender are clearly working together in this instance. (Indeed, the statistically significant authenticity by gender coefficient for Warren is of about the same magnitude as the statistically significant authenticity coefficient for Biden. See Table J1 in the Appendix.)

¹² See Tables J1 and J2 in the supplementary appendix for the detailed models both for when the other candidate traits are and are not included.

Figure 7: First-preference vote choice logistic regressions with gender by authenticity interaction term



Demographics/ideology/competence/empathy included, but coefficients not displayed. Coefficients are plotted with 95% confidence intervals.

Finally, in our models thus far, we have not accounted for the possibility that voters' evaluations of each candidate have an impact on their likelihood of having a vote intention for other candidates, and so it may not only be their perceptions of the particular candidate they are evaluating that matter (Alvarez and Nagler, 1998). To do so, we use an alternative-specific conditional logit model that allows us to include both alternative-specific variables such as trait evaluations for each alternative (i.e. candidate) and case-specific variables that only vary between individuals (such as age and income) (Mcfadden, 1974). Results are provided in Supplementary Appendix L. They show that all three of the trait items from our main models have a significant positive association with vote intention, meaning that greater authenticity/empathy/competence evaluations for a specific alternative (candidate) are

associated with selecting that alternative (a voting intention for that candidate as their first choice).

6. Discussion and Conclusions:

Our Iowa Caucus results suggest that, much like more established traits used in electoral research—competence, empathy, integrity and leadership—perceptions of authenticity help us to explain how voters feel about candidates. Crucially, when statistically compared to these leading traits (see Figure 4), authenticity appears to rival competence in importance, both in terms of its breadth (measured as number of candidates affected) and strength (measured as coefficient size).

These Caucus results have further value in revealing what authenticity can (and cannot) do for a presidential candidate. Taking the latter point first, the Sanders case makes clear that, even if a candidate is broadly viewed as authentic, that will deliver votes only if authenticity is really a critical trait for the vote choice. Put another way, the trait itself must have importance in the vote calculation. With respect to Sanders, it appears that his supporters, while they thought him authentic, supported him in particular for his very liberal policy preferences. By way of contrast, Biden supporters for instance did not appear drawn to him on ideological grounds. However, those that did intend to vote for him did perceive him to be more authentic than those who intended to vote for other candidates, once the competing forces of demography, ideology and traits were taken into account.

These results also open up space for the *types* of candidates that are perceived as authentic. Initially, they suggest an ideological relationship with the two ostensibly most ‘progressive’ candidates in the race – Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren – considered the most authentic candidates by a considerable margin. Nevertheless, this apparent authenticity leverage, in a direct sense, fades in a more properly specified, multivariate context. From that context it appeared to be the more centrist candidates of Biden and Buttigieg who, in the rough

and tumble of the host of campaign factors at work, benefitted electorally when voters perceived them as more authentic or had a more uphill battle among voters who did not see them in this light. Warren uniquely benefitted among female voters, who responded to her perceived authenticity, while there was no gendered relationship for any of the male candidates. This highlights the importance of considering the role gender may play in forming the authenticity bond.

These results build on previous work that has demonstrated the electoral benefit of being perceived as authentic in a comparative context (Stiers et al., 2021). A key advance of this Iowa study is that its design enabled us to keep partisanship – a likely confounding variable – constant, and authenticity still appears as substantially important. With the lack of an effective opposition to Donald Trump’s candidacy for the Republican Party nomination in 2020¹³ it was not feasible to carry out a similar survey with Republican voters, and so examining the role of authenticity perceptions for such voters would be a worthwhile endeavour for research at the 2024 primaries and caucuses. Future research may also wish to examine how this relationship operates in other states. Moreover, given the increasing trend towards the greater involvement of party members in the selection of party leaders across many western democracies (Cozza and Somer-Topcu, 2021), our findings are likely to be relevant to electoral contests outside of the United States.

What our work demonstrates, we believe, is that candidate authenticity and its dynamic should be taken seriously. When scholars of elections seek to explain why voters prefer certain candidates over others, an examination of perceived authenticity can do much of the heavy lifting. Perceptions of authenticity, in competition with other noteworthy traits, managed to go a long way in differentiating between supporters of different candidates. This ‘discriminatory power’ is perhaps the most valuable asset the study of candidate authenticity can bring to future

¹³ Where he for instance won over 97% of votes at the 2020 Iowa Republican Party Caucus

electoral studies on the impact of traits. As such, authenticity should be included in future candidate-centric voting research alongside the ‘big guns’ of competence, empathy, integrity and leadership.

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