

RATIONALIZATIONS OF CANDIDATE DISHONESTY VS. CORRUPTION:
PROCESS MODELING THE MEDIATING ROLES OF PERCEIVED HONESTY
AND LEADERSHIP STRENGTH IN PARTISAN VOTING IN THE 2016 U.S.
PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

by

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I dedicate this research to all of those who have incited the best in me over these past few years as a master's candidate: You know who you are.

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ABSTRACT

Using process modeling to analyze data from the 2016 American National Election Study, this thesis investigates whether a model used to explain the paradoxical electoral success of criminally corrupt politicians in democracies can be adapted to explain certain voter choices during the 2016 U.S presidential election, which featured two candidates, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, who were widely regarded not necessarily as corrupt, but as dishonest. The study finds that, consistent with the model, some of each candidate's supporters believed their candidate to be honest. Independently, though, backers of Trump seemed to support him because they judged him a strong leader and approved of strong leaders who were willing to "bend the rules in order to get things done." The thesis discusses implications of these findings for research about voter choices and suggests that refined operationalizations of these attitudes could help model how voters react to candidates' honesty levels.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented disapproval and distrust of presidential candidates Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in the 2016 U.S. presidential election generate a profound interest in the modern electorate's voting rationale. Across academia, journalism, and public discourse, interest has grown in exploring voters' responses to various media amidst the modern swell of "fake news" and misinformation (e.g., Iyengar, 2016), while considerable attention has been given to understanding the various concerns (Tesler, 2016), anxieties (Albertson & Gadarian, 2015), resentments (Cramer, 2016), polarization (Hetherington, et al., 2016) and distrust (Shockley-Zalabak, et al., 2017) that appear to have driven many voters' electoral choice. As this and other work suggests, candidate character was frequently at the forefront of discussion in this election. Each campaign focused on highlighting its own candidate's valuable attributes—Clinton, her leadership experience and knowledge; Trump, his savvy business leadership and vision to shake up Washington—while simultaneously criticizing the other campaign's candidate for allegedly disqualifying character flaws. Notably, Clinton was denounced as morally corrupt, and Trump was condemned as "temperamentally unfit" (Luscombe, 2016). Focus on the candidates' characters was intensified by news media's characteristically overindulgent focus on the personalities and "he-said she-said" allegations traded by the candidates (Holian & Prsyby, 2015; Patterson, 2016). In light of this character-centered election and the established role that candidate character plays in vote choice, an exploration into how voters evaluated these personal characteristics of Trump and Clinton will likely prove useful in understanding how voter perception informs voter choice.

Alongside factors of party affiliation and issue stance, candidate character attributes have long been shown to have a leading role in shaping voters' electoral choice (e.g., Holian & Prysby, 2015). Political science and voter behavior research persistently demonstrate that voter perceptions of candidate character traits are important short-term forces that influence voter behavior in presidential elections (e.g., Wattenberg, 2016; Holian & Prysby, 2015; Funk, 1999, 1997, 1996; Kinder, 1983; Kinder, et al., 1980; Campbell, et al., 1960). Although their influence is dynamic from one candidate and election to the next, these voter assessments have been shown to be largely influential, and oftentimes predictive, of the winning candidate (e.g., Holian & Prysby, 2015; Campbell, et al., 1960). Amidst the wealth of research on this topic, four trait dimensions have commonly emerged to describe candidate character traits, each consisting of various qualities: integrity (i.e., honesty, frankness, morality), leadership (i.e., ability to get things done and inspire others), competence (i.e. experience and knowledge to manage effectively), and empathy (i.e. caring about the needs of ordinary citizens) (Holian & Prysby, 2015; Kinder, et al., 1980). Although these traits have been found to fluctuate in relevance and strength for different candidates from one election to the next, the dimensions of integrity and leadership have frequently emerged as primary considerations for voters when choosing a presidential candidate (Funk, 1996, 1997; Kinder, et al., 1980). The leading role that integrity and strong leadership plays in voter perception and, in turn, voter choice, has further been supported by recurring studies into what voters value in an ideal presidential candidate (Trent, et al., 2017; Kinder, et al., 1980).

Over the course of the 2016 election, data showed that voters widely expressed concern over lack of honesty and fitness to presidentially lead (Pew Research, 2016). Leading up to the election, national polls estimated historically low numbers for both candidates on such measures: Only 33% judged Clinton as “honest and trustworthy,” and a statistically similar 35% said the same of Trump (Newport, 2016a), while Trump was perceived to hold fewer of the personality and leadership qualities needed to be president (32%) than Clinton (51%) (Newport, 2016b). However, exit polls indicated strong leadership to have been a salient factor for voters in this election, with a Morning Consult/Politico poll finding that 36% of voters indicated this to be the most important factor for the incoming president (Shepard, 2016), while a New York Times poll found the ability to “bring needed change” was the most influential character attribute to many voters’ electoral choice, second only to “has the right experience” (Huang, et. al., 2016).

Furthermore, these candidate character priorities—along with voters’ assessments of each candidates’ character attributes—appeared sharply divided along party lines, with 83% of Trump voters seeking the “bring needed change” leadership quality compared with only 14% of Clinton supporters, while 90% of Clinton voters sought the “right experience” factor compared with only 8% of Trump voters (Huang, et al., 2016). Similarly, voters overwhelmingly perceived their own candidate to be honest and trustworthy (94% for each), while believing the opponent to be largely the opposite (73% of Trump voters said this did not apply to Clinton; 71% of Clinton voters said this did not apply to Trump). Polarization was further most starkly evident in voters’ antipathy toward the opposing candidate, with roughly 95% of each side expressing unfavorable opinions of the other side’s nominee (Huang, et al., 2016).

The impact of unprecedentedly low favorability ratings (Trump 39%, Clinton 48%) in this election thus appears to be, in large part, a consequence of voters' perceptions of each candidate's honesty and leadership, which appeared sharply divided among a polarized electorate (Saad, 2016). This backdrop of severe distrust and disapproval of both presidential candidates provides a unique opportunity to analyze how voters weighed perceived candidate traits, specifically honesty and leadership, when deciding which candidate to support. Such an exploration holds promise for better explaining the results of this election, as well as for predicting and interpreting future elections, while further holding implications for better understanding the modern electorate's perceptions of and regard for truth.

The present research therefore seeks to explore how supporters of both Trump and Clinton processed their perceptions of candidate honesty and leadership strength when casting their votes for these two largely unpopular and distrusted candidates. In order to explain this process, this paper thus turns to scholarly literature on a potentially related topic—voters' support for corrupt politicians. Within this area of research, two notable hypotheses have emerged to explain how voters rationalize their decision to vote for a candidate or sitting politician who is demonstrably corrupt. First, the *information hypothesis* suggests that voters lack access to, or otherwise disbelieve, accurate and credible information about the corrupt behavior. Second, the *trade-off hypothesis* suggests that voters are aware of the corruption but choose to overlook it because they believe that the candidate will accomplish other valuable overall goals through his or her time in office (Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013).

These hypotheses for voter reasoning could help explain how at least some voters dealt with perceptions of candidate dishonesty during the 2016 election. To be sure, “dishonesty” as conceptualized in this study differs from “corruption” as conceptualized by Winters and Weitz-Shapiro. “Corruption involves breaking laws against crimes such as accepting bribes or demanding kickbacks. Dishonesty can be such a crime – for example, if it rises to the level of perjury. But while a candidate for public office in the United States might be judged as immoral for hiding, distorting or inventing facts during a campaign, it is unlikely the candidate could be successfully sued in civil court or indicted in criminal court as a result. Despite this key conceptual difference, though, both “dishonesty” and “corruption” can have consequences, and those consequences can be serious, be they fines or imprisonment in the case of “corruption” or public disapproval or censure in the case of “dishonesty.” For the purposes of this paper, a further refinement in the conceptualization of “dishonesty” is needed. It may be objectively true that one candidate was more dishonest than the other before and during the 2016 election; however, undertaking such an assessment is beyond the scope of this study. This study deals exclusively with voter perceptions of the candidates’ honesty, not with how honest each candidate actually was, either in an absolute or relative sense. With these parallels drawn between “corruption” and “perceived dishonesty,” it is possible that the Winters & Weitz-Shapiro model for how voters process corruption in the context of politics could provide insight into how voters process perceived dishonesty in the context of politics.

For instance, although national trust in both Trump and Clinton was dismally low, a large portion of supporters for each reported believing their candidate to be honest (Newport, 2016a), meaning that despite widespread fact-checking scores and mass media

reports indicating these candidates' dishonest behavior, at least some voters appear to have lacked access to such information, or otherwise chosen to disbelieve it. Such a process would be consistent with the Winters & Weitz-Shapiro model's "information hypothesis." But there may have been other voters who absorbed and accepted evidence of dishonest behavior by their preferred candidate yet supported the candidate for other reasons, including a belief that the candidate would accomplish – honestly or otherwise – goals considered valuable by such voters. Such a process would be consistent with the "trade-off hypothesis" in the Winters & Weitz-Shapiro model. Thus, an adaptation of the Winters & Weitz-Shapiro model to account for voter support of dishonest candidates could offer a rich corpus of contexts and implications with which to interpret how voters rationalized their votes in the 2016 election.

The goal of this paper is therefore to explore the roles of perceived candidate honesty and leadership strength for voters in choosing between two widely distrusted presidential candidates who were popularly framed as unfit to lead. Specifically, it tests an original assumption that voters in the 2016 election weighed these two candidate traits similarly as when others rationalize charges of political corruption. A literature review first details relevant research on factors that influence voters' perceptions of candidate's character, then explores research on electoral support for corrupt politicians. A contextual review of Trump's and Clinton's reputations for dishonesty and disrepute then leads into the study's rationale and hypotheses. PROCESS modeling (e.g., Hayes, 2013) is used to analyze ANES data in an attempt to model the paths through which Republican and Democratic voters weighed perceived candidate honesty when deciding how to vote. Results find evidence of the information hypotheses in the models for both Trump and

Clinton voters, whereas evidence of the trade-off hypothesis was found uniquely in the model for Trump voters. The findings are discussed alongside their implications for understanding and predicting future elections.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Voter Assessments of Candidate Character

Decades of research into voting behavior have suggested three primary factors that shape voting choice in U.S. presidential elections: party identification, issue stance, and candidate character traits (Wattenberg, 2016; Holian & Prysby, 2015; Graefe, 2013; Asher, 1992; Campbell, et al., 1960). Although party identification and issue preference are known to be much more stable and enduring indicators of political attitudes (Carmines & Stimson, 1989), candidate character trait assessments have been widely valued for understanding fluctuations in voter behavior precisely because they are more changeable from one candidate and election to the next (Bishin, et al., 2006). Because this research is interested in the influence of certain candidate character traits on voting behavior, the present review of literature begins by focusing on the role of significant influential factors as they relate to voters' assessments of candidate character. The resultant insights are then applied in a detailed review of research exploring why voters support candidates who are demonstrably corrupt. The context surrounding Trump and Clinton's reputations for honesty and leadership are then discussed as factors of their own behavior, as well as its media fact-checking accountability. Finally, connections are drawn between the literature on candidate character traits and voters' presumed disregard for perceived candidate dishonesty in the 2016 presidential election, ultimately posing three hypotheses that seek to test a rationalizing model of how at least some voters rationalized their support for a candidate independently of whether they considered the candidate to be truthful.

Candidate Character Traits. As noted earlier, research has found that candidate character traits can be organized into four categories, or trait dimensions: Integrity, competence, leadership, and empathy (Holian & Prysby, 2015; Kinder, et al., 1980). In their extensive review of influential candidate character traits, Holian and Prysby (2015) define the boundaries of how these concepts are interpreted by voters and thus measured by researchers. Integrity indicates honesty, and thus voters' preference for a candidate who "does not misrepresent facts, who does not bend the truth, and who is not deceptive in his or her statements" (p. 28). Qualities that are related to honesty include sincerity—being clear and frank about one's beliefs; authenticity—not pretending to be something other than one's true self; trustworthiness—eliciting faith in voters that one will behave honestly and ethically in office; and morality—being principled and setting a good example for the nation. Competence and leadership are noted to conceptually overlap and thus be frequently used to indicate the same concept, although these (and many other) authors offer a distinction between the two qualities. Competence is defined by qualities of intelligence, knowledge, experience, good judgement, and stability, thus indicating a president who is "able to make sound decisions and to manage the government effectively" (p. 27). Strong leadership, on the other hand, indicates a president who is able to "take decisive actions, to get things done, and to inspire and lead the nation" (p. 27). Empathy is primarily indicated by compassion, concern, or caring for the "average" or "ordinary" American citizen, especially within the context of supporting "governmental policies and actions to alleviate the problems faced by those in need" rather than those that "benefit groups who are already powerful and well-off" (p. 29).

A large number of studies have concluded that various indicators of integrity and

competence are among the most highly valued character traits in presidential elections (Martinez Roson, 2016; Bishin, et al., 2006; Funk, 1996; 1997; 1999; Popkin, 1991; Fiorina, 1988; Kinder, 1983; Kinder, et al., 1980). This research has largely followed studies that show these traits to be significant in voters' idealistic notions of a president. In early research on what qualities voters value in a "prototype president," Kinder, Peters, Abelson, and Fiske (1980) found that voters believed honesty and strong leadership to be of the utmost necessity in a president. In formulating an understanding of modern voters' "ideal presidential candidate," recent longitudinal research into which candidate attributes voters judged most important or desirable found that, from 1988 to 2016, voters have consistently valued competence, honesty, high moral integrity, and compassion for people's needs (Trent, et al., 2017). Interestingly, this research found that in the 2016 election, honesty—which had been the consistently-highest-rated quality over the 28-year study—fell in importance behind indicators of competence. Despite this, these two characteristics appear to remain the most important ideals for voters in a presidential candidate. Trent and colleagues' (2017) study further found that distinctions in the "degree of idealness" of certain qualities existed across certain groups, such as age, gender, and—most prominently—party identification—thereby implicating the significant role of such factors in shaping voters' assessments of candidate character traits.

Partisanship. Party identification, or partisanship, has long been known to play a key role in shaping how voters form opinions about political issues. Heuristics literature describes how, in aligning one's political identity with that of an existing party, partisanship helps individuals to make decisions, form opinions, and interpret information

about complex political issues by using a “few, simple cognitive cues” that draw on the known ideals and issue/policy stances of one’s party (Anduiza, et al., 2013, p. 1679; Lavine & Gschwend, 2006). For this reason, party affiliation has been found to considerably shape voters’ assessments of their candidates’ traits. For instance, party loyalty has been found to be positively correlated with perceptions that a voter’s party’s candidate is superior on a range of traits (Holian & Prysby, 2015).

Furthermore, research has frequently shown that perceptions of candidate character traits tend to split along political party lines. An influential line of research has suggested that partisan evaluations of candidate traits can be explained, to some extent, by a theory of “trait ownership” (Hayes, 2005), which contends that the two major political parties own certain *issues*, and that their candidates further own the character *traits* associated with those issues. This theory asserts that Americans perceive Republicans to be stronger on qualities of leadership and morality, while Democrats are considered to be more compassionate and empathetic. It further argues that voters often reward candidates who “successfully ‘trespass’ on their opponent’s trait territory,” while those who fail to successfully embody their party’s traits are often disadvantaged (Hayes, 2005, p. 909).

In an aggregate analysis of ANES data from 1988 – 2008, Holian & Prysby (2015) find that these characterizations mostly hold true. Their study finds that Republicans have been viewed more favorably for “strong leadership” in all but two elections, with the two exceptions explained by popular views of George H. W. Bush as a “wimp” (p. 53), while Democrats have consistently been rated highest on empathy measures across the study’s 30-year span. However, they found that other trait

dimensions, such as integrity and competence, have been more competitive from one election to the next, and therefore less distinctly trait-owned. Specifically, qualities of honesty and morality have received roughly equal consideration between parties' candidates over the years, with the single exception of Bill Clinton. The apparent long-term relevance of partisan trait ownership in predicting voter perceptions of candidate character is clearly valuable in assessing voter rationality in the 2016 election.

Beyond these distinctions in trait ownership, partisanship's growth is further implicated in influencing candidate character assessments. Amidst increasing influence of partisanship on voter behavior (Bartels, 2000), the past several decades have witnessed increasing partisan polarization among Americans, with increasing numbers within both major parties leaning farther away from one another in ideology, policy, and institutional trust (Iyengar, 2016). Hetherington, Long, and Rudolph (2016) show that this polarization has also affected voters' evaluations of presidential candidate traits, in that both the distance between Republican and Democrats' assessments has increased on average, as well as the extremity of partisans' evaluations of the opposing party's candidate.

The influence of this increasing partisan polarization on voters' evaluations of candidates' character further owes to its impact on news media in recent decades (Leeper, 2014; Prior, 2013; Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). Today's increasingly fragmented media landscape has witnessed a surge in non-credible media outlets that specifically cater to partisan biases—often at the expense of truth and factual reality (Prior, 2013). Research has found that in recent years, increasing numbers of voters (though not majorities) are attending to partisan media that confirm their existing beliefs while ignoring inconvenient truths (Iyengar & Hahn, 2009). As a result, many researchers have implicated a

polarization by media effect, in which voters who selectively expose themselves to dominantly partisan-friendly information often become more polarized in their values, beliefs, and perceptions of reality (Iyengar, 2016; Budak, et al., 2016; Flaxman, et al., 2016; Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011; Davis & Dunaway, 2016). In such instances, the influence of partisanship on voter behavior is afforded even greater weight.

Additionally, historically low trust in media and government institutions over the past decade has shaped the manner in which voters receive and believe information about not only candidates and political issues, but also the state of the nation and global affairs (Pew Research, 2017; Swift, 2016). Amidst increasing polarization of news media and viewers alike, the threat of advancing misinformation has constricted the ability of citizens to cast their votes with knowledgeable intention and confidence (Iyengar, 2016)—a concern that has been found to be an even greater possibility for partisans when acquiring knowledge or forming opinions about specific political issues (Davis & Dunaway, 2016). Despite the recent rise of fact-checking journalism to “set the record straight” (Graves, 2016), studies indicate that its efficacy is increasingly diminished, as voters translate their skepticism in media objectivity to this new form of journalism (Rasmussen Reports, 2016; Graves, 2016). This increasing polarization and media skepticism have largely worked to reshape modern society and its perceptions of reality into what has been popularly characterized as the “post-truth” era of subjective facts (Oxford, 2016; Fish, 2016).

The present salience of increasing partisanship and polarization, partisan news media and selective exposure, and subjective facts and reality, all point to the considerable influence of increasing partisanship on voter behavior and hold serious

implications for voter evaluations of candidate character traits. Assessing voter perceptions of Trump and Clinton's honesty and leadership strength within the context of partisanship's modern influence will prove useful for both testing relationships as well as for interpreting results.

Voter Support for Corrupt Candidates

In seeking to understand how voters in this election perceived and evaluated candidate dishonesty and leadership strength, this research draws on a seemingly parallel issue in which these two traits are also primary factors: the electoral support for corrupt politicians.

The essential role of the electorate in voting in honest and competent political leaders is vividly highlighted in instances of political corruption. As discussed above, this study acknowledges important conceptual differences between political corruption and political dishonesty, and further between political dishonesty and perceived political dishonesty. But the literature on political corruption and voters' responses to it nonetheless offers valuable insights for the research at hand. Often cited for its wide-ranging and detrimental effects on economic and social development (de Vries & Solaz, 2017; Rothstein, 2011), political corruption is consequential for its effect of eroding political trust and undermining political legitimacy (Della Porta & Vannucci, 1999; Seligson, 2002; Andersen & Tverdova, 2003; Chang & Chu, 2006). Furthermore, an apparent lack of electoral punishment to political corruption ultimately threatens democratic stability, as it clearly undermines the democratic theory tenet of democratic accountability (de Sousa & Moriconi, 2013) through which "rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens acting indirectly through the competition

and cooperation of their elected representatives” (Schmitter & Karl, 1991, p. 76). The failure of voters to utilize their democratic power by holding corrupt officials to account, thereby constraining damaging corruption, is therefore a topic of great consequence to democracy and, in response, of significant interest to scholars.

A persistent paradox in many democratic countries, the election and re-election of corrupt politicians has been the topic of much research (Weitz-Shapiro & Winters, 2017; Klačnja, 2017; Garzia, 2014; de Sousa & Moriconi, 2013; Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013; Anduiza, et al., 2013; Chang & Chu, 2006; Welch & Hibbing, 1997; Peters & Welch, 1980; Rundquist, et al., 1977). Rational voter theory (de Vries & Solaz, 2017) and that the fundamentals of democracy include an assumption, or at least a hope, that voters, if made aware, will choose to condemn the criminal behavior of corrupt politicians who accept bribes, steal, misappropriate resources, abuse their power for personal gain, or otherwise engage in illegal activity (Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013; Nye, 1967). Surprisingly, however, in developing and established democracies alike, a great deal of research indicates that corrupt politicians are rarely met with “devastating consequences” to their careers or electability (Anduiza, et al., 2013, p. 1665; Garzia, 2014; Welch & Hibbing, 1997; Peters & Welch, 1980; Rundquist, et al., 1977). Rather, studies repeatedly demonstrate that such candidates are frequently “successfully reelected despite charges, or even convictions, of illegal behavior” (Golden, 2010, p. 8). While some research into this phenomenon has implicated the influence of contextual or institutional factors, such as “the presence of strong economic growth . . . or a lack of institutional clarity” or strength (de Vries & Solaz, 2017, pp. 392-393; Golden & Mahdavi, 2015), prevailing explanations have centered on the importance of individual factors, such as values,

knowledge, and education, that shape both voters' perceptions of alleged corruption as well as their willingness to tolerate it in a political candidate or representative (de Vries and Solaz, 2017; Rundquist, et al., 1977).

Forming a foundation for this latter line of inquiry, Rundquist, Strom, and Peters's (1977) classic experimental election research proposed three hypotheses to explain why voters support corrupt candidates: First, voters are ignorant of the corruption; second, voters receive "material inducements" by ignoring corruption; and third, voters "implicitly trade" knowledge of candidate corruption for some other desirable benefit, such as agreeable policy positions on issues that they value more than political integrity (pp. 955-957). A large corpus of subsequent research has sought to test the real-world practicality, as well as further experimental extent, of these hypotheses. Throughout these studies, persistent support has been found for both the "ignorant voter" and "implicit trade" hypotheses (Klašnja, 2017; de Vries and Solaz, 2017; Garzia, 2014; Anduiza, et al., 2013; Peters & Welch, 1980; Welch & Hibbing, 1997).

Ignorant voters (Information Hypothesis). Studies that support the ignorant voter hypothesis—which has been referred to in recent studies as the *limited information hypothesis* (Anduiza, et al., 2013) or, simply, the *information hypothesis* (Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013)—have explored how voters fail to learn or believe evidence of a candidate's corruption due to a lack of accessible, credible, and timely information about corrupt behavior. (Weitz-Shapiro & Winters, 2017; Muñoz, et. al., 2016; Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013; Peters & Welch, 1980).

Many scholars have noted that trustworthy information about corruption scandals is more likely to elicit electoral punishment, whereas non-credible sources are often

disregarded as unreliable information, or “partisan tricks” (Rundquist, et al., 1977, p. 955; Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013; Peters & Welch, 1980). Education and political knowledge have therefore been widely implicated in affecting voters’ ability to access, recognize, understand, and evaluate information about corruption. For example, Weitz-Shapiro and Winters (2017) recently noted the role of higher education in being able to discern the credibility of source information about candidate corruption.

In finding that some voters, even when confronted with evidence of corruption, still choose to support corrupt candidates on the grounds that the candidates are clean and honest, many researchers have pointed to the vital role of a voter’s motivation to believe or disbelieve claims of corruption. In theorizing a framework for explaining corruption voting, de Vries and Solaz (2017) describe this process as the “blame attribution” stage, in which voters rationalize the information they have acquired through personal experience or media exposure in order to “attribute responsibility for corruption and adjust their performance evaluations of elected office holders accordingly” (p. 397).

Increasingly, research has demonstrated the influence of group-serving biases on this crucial step in voters’ decisions to believe or disbelieve corruption information (Klašnja, 2017; Anduiza, et al., 2013; Taylor & Doria, 1981). Partisanship has emerged as a significant motivating factor that influences voters to both disbelieve corruption charges against a preferred candidate, or otherwise absolve such a candidate of the blame in corruption circumstances (Muñoz, et al., 2016; Anduiza, et al., 2013; Chang & Kerr, 2010). Using experimental evidence in Spain, Anduiza and colleagues (2013) implicate the role of a perceptual partisan bias in how voters evaluate information about corruption, finding that voters are less likely to believe the credibility of corruption charges that are

brought against a candidate in their own party than when those charges are brought against someone outside their party. They therefore conclude that partisanship influences voters' willingness to overlook and tolerate known corruption. This study implies that partisanship is a vital component in both the ignorant voter path as well as the implicit trade path for voters who support corrupt politicians.

Implicit trade (Trade-off Hypothesis). The implicit trade hypothesis—which recent studies refer to as the *trade-off hypothesis* (Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013)—involves voters knowingly tolerating corruption because they believe that a politician, despite being corrupt, will still provide valuable benefits to either a voter (i.e., favoring an individual, one's family/friends, or larger demographic), his or her group (i.e., party, policy, or issue stances) or the public at large (i.e., public works projects or economic prosperity). Voters who make this trade-off have been characterized as those whose political participation is “primarily determined by the fulfilment of their basic needs” and who, as a result, “value efficacy above any other ethical standard, such as integrity, transparency or even legality” (de Sousa & Moriconi, 2013, p. 492). A great deal of research has sought to understand both the types of voters who make this trade-off decision, and the micro- and macro- factors that influence their willingness to do so.

As with the ignorant voter path, partisanship has been found to play a significant motivating role in voters' willingness to overlook corruption. In their early work on this topic, Peters & Welch (1980) noted varying degrees to which voters rationalized or ignored corruption based on whether the candidate possessed “other, overriding virtues...such as appropriate stands on the issues and the right party affiliation” (p. 706). Chang and Kerr (2010) focused a study on the influence of voters' insider and outsider

status on electoral corruption tolerance, concluding that “voters view corruption through the lens of identity, and that partisan and ethnic insiders are more likely to turn a blind eye to corruption” (p. 4). Anduiza, et al.’s (2013) experimental findings support this assertion, finding that partisan voters evaluate corruption charges more favorably in cases that affect their own party, and as a result, are less likely to punish it under such circumstances.

Further individual-level factors have also been found to pre-dispose willingness to overlook or condone corruption. As in the ignorant voter pathway, the impact of education and political knowledge is frequently salient in the trade-off path. Political sophistication has been found to mitigate partisan bias as described above (Anduiza, et al., 2013), though the assertion by a sizable number of researchers that higher levels of education serve to decrease electoral corruption tolerance has been contested by a smaller number of studies. Many agree that higher education enhances voters’ ability to not only successfully recognize incidences of corruption (McCann & Domínguez, 1998), but also to “understand and forecast the political, economic, and social consequences of it” (Martínez Rosón, 2016, p. 81) and therefore fairly allocate responsibility to politicians involved (de Vries & Solaz, 2017). However, some studies have suggested that more knowledgeable voters tend to be “more concerned about policy issues, and thus downplay the importance of integrity to assess a candidate’s performance in office,” (de Sousa & Moriconi, 2013, p. 486). Johnston (1986) argued that the greater political knowledge of affluent voters led them to be more aware and expectant of—and therefore more forgiving of—political corruption. Moreover, low education and political awareness have been associated with institutional distrust, as those with “less knowledge and

understanding of the consequences of corruption” are suggested to be “more sensitive to the media’s hyper-sensationalism” and therefore “assume a more anti-establishment position” that is thus *more* willing to punish corruption (de Sousa & Moriconi, 2013, p. 486). Despite these mixed results, education and political awareness, alongside partisanship, are widely regarded by researchers as primary factors in not only whether or not voters are willing to trade-off corruption, but also in whether and how they perceive information about corruption at all.

Perceived Leadership Strength: Motivation to Trade-off. Contextual factors that further influence voters’ decisions to tolerate corruption highlight the role of perceived political leadership strength in the trade-off path. In societies with low institutional trust, voters have been found to be more willing to overlook corruption as a result of several different factors. Belief that one’s government is inherently corrupt has been linked to corruption tolerance due to an expectation that all politicians are corrupt, and therefore a willingness to accept tolerance in exchange for strong leadership (de Sousa & Moriconi, 2013). Furthermore, citizens in weak government institutions as well as those who do not trust their government to “solve their problems with fairness, impartiality and efficiency” have been found to be more willing to “turn a blind eye to corruption” in pursuit of alternative means to address their needs (de Sousa & Moriconi, 2013, p. 487; La Porta, et al., 1997; Della Porta & Vannucci, 1999). Discovering a macro-level application of this link between low institutional trust and corruption tolerance, Martínez Rosón’s (2016) observational study found that Costa Rican voters who support a complete replacement of democracy in times of hardship are 60% more

likely to support a competent, though corrupt politician over one who is honest, but less competent.

Economic prosperity and perceived leadership strength are also strong motivations for voters to overlook or condone corrupt behavior. Voters have been found to punish perceived political corruption more during times of economic hardship than prosperity (Zechmeister & Zizumbo-Colunga, 2013), and to be more likely to support a corrupt candidate who has maintained a “good administrative record (e.g., attracting investments, presiding over economic growth, and securing well-being for their constituency)” (Muñoz, et. al., 2016, p. 604). Exemplifying this particular rationale for corruption tolerance, a common Brazilian term has been adopted by many researchers in seeking to understand voter attitudes towards corruption: *Rouba, mas faz*—He robs, but he gets things done (Muñoz, et al., 2016; Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013; de Sousa & Moriconi, 2013). It appears then, that voters’ willingness to turn a blind eye to corruption is heavily reliant upon perceptions of strong leadership.

It therefore comes as no surprise that a great deal of corruption voting research supports the assertion that many trade-off voters value efficiency and leadership over integrity (de Sousa & Moriconi, 2013). The reality that many voters are willing to accept corruption and its various consequences in exchange for “good management or economic well-being” (Muñoz, et al., 2016, p. 612) suggests that considerations of political honesty and integrity are either disregarded at the ballot box or outweighed by more (subjectively) valuable factors and outcomes that are largely contingent on a candidate’s perceived leadership strength.

Context: Honesty and Leadership in the 2016 Presidential Election

In order to better understand how voters formed their opinions of Trump and Clinton's honesty levels and leadership strength, it is useful to first outline the context in which these two traits were portrayed to voters.

The behavior of the candidates themselves undoubtedly played a key role in voters' perceptions of their character traits. Building on his celebrity status as a self-made billionaire real-estate mogul and aggressive reality-TV personality, Trump presented himself as a savvy dealmaker and invincible leader who alone had the answers to the problems plaguing the country (Lilleker, et al., 2016). Championing his lack of political experience, he argued that his background made him more qualified than Clinton to "drain the swamp" of Washington leaders who, he asserted, too-often bowed to private interests. However, in his emotional rallying of voters against the status quo with vague promises to "make America great again," his campaign rhetoric soon became synonymous with misleading exaggerations of fact, repetitions of baseless and often conspiratorial assertions, and bold claims of "believe me..." fact that often turned out to be unfounded or blatantly false (Greenberg, 2016). A small sampling of Trump's campaign falsehoods illustrates a range of claims that undermined his awareness of national issues, from grossly overestimating the unemployment rate and number of illegal immigrants in the U.S. (Carroll, 2016) to re-tweeting "wildly inaccurate" crime statistics to support his claim that "crime is rising" (Greenberg, 2015). He made further misleading statements in his efforts to bolster his own image and discredit that of his opponents, such as falsely claiming that his book *The Art of the Deal* is the best-selling business book of

all time and citing the notoriously errant *National Enquirer* tabloid in suggesting that Ted Cruz's father was linked to John F. Kennedy's assassination attempt (Carroll, 2016).

In opposite fashion, Clinton focused her image on highlighting her political experience, arguing that it made her the obviously more qualified candidate to lead the country. Taking a less emotional approach to rallying voters, she frequently pointed to her history of political and legal successes as an indication of her leadership strength, and attempted to outline her approaches to policy and major campaign issues, such as immigration, healthcare, foreign policy, and women's rights. However, Clinton was widely criticized for a lack of transparency in response to serious political scandals that plagued her throughout this election, most notably the ongoing federal investigation of her use of a private email server during her time as Secretary of State (Greenberg, 2016). Paired with a popular characterization of her as cold, calculating, and guarded, such controversies earned her a reputation for deceit that ranged from simple distrust in her authenticity to conviction that she was hiding corrupt behavior (Greenberg, 2016).

Further fueling these candidates' reputations, both candidates attempted to overcome their own low credibility ratings by directing their campaigns into an ad-hominem-attack contest of "who lies more or who is the worst candidate" (Bradner, 2016). Among a host of caustic and competing accusations, "Crooked Hillary" (Jamieson, 2016) was accused of covering up corrupt activity in her private email scandal and catering to private over public interests, while Trump was framed as "temperamentally unfit" to be president and a fraud for refusing to release his tax returns (Luscombe, 2016). In an ultimate battle of he-said-she-said, each candidate vehemently

denied allegations against themselves while insisting the other to be corrupt, extreme, and a threat to the nation (Jamieson, 2016; Luscombe, 2016; Bradner, 2016).

News media coverage of the candidates also had a significant impact on voters' perceptions of these candidates for a variety of reasons. First, the unconventional "rhetorical warfare" (Bradner, 2016) between these two candidates incited even greater media attention on candidate behavior and personality than election coverage's standard over-indulgence (Graber, 2006), which ultimately left even less room for performance-related information that could inform voters of the candidates' approaches to policy and issues (Patterson, 2016).

Second, voters' trust in mass media "to accurately and fairly report the news" (Swift, 2016)—already at historic lows—was dealt a huge blow with the sudden emergence of "fake news," which spread divisive misinformation on social media about the alleged behavior of these candidates as well as about hot-button social issues (Wendling, 2018). Third, increasing polarization drove large numbers of citizens to rely on highly-partisan news sources that are frequently, though not always, known to misrepresent facts to better support ideological viewpoints (Faris, et al., 2017). As a result, expanding distrust in the objectivity of what right-wing factions frequently criticized as the "liberal" and "mainstream media" became a rallying point for many voters. As Trump embraced this mentality in the face of negative coverage of him and his policies, his frequent cries to discredit the "left-wing fake news" erected hefty partisan barriers between certain voters and their perceived credibility for high-quality, journalistic information about the character of the presidential candidates.

In response to this prevalent spreading of inaccurate and misleading information, fact-checking journalism rose to the forefront of this election's coverage, with its ideal to "revitalize the 'truth-seeking' tradition in journalism by holding public figures to account for the things they say" (Graves, 2016, p. 6). PolitiFact, a Pulitzer-Prize-winner in fact-checking, demonstrated that Trump was nearly four times more likely than Clinton to make egregiously false statements, with over 70% of his statements falling under the categories of "False," "Mostly False," or "Pants on Fire," compared to Clinton's 25%. Conversely, Clinton's fact-checking scorecard reflected greater accuracy, with 53% of her statements rated as "True" or "Mostly True" compared to Trump's 15% (Sharockman, 2016). Despite such indicators meant to "set the record straight" (Coddington, et al., 2014), polls and research find that a majority of citizens distrust even the objectivity of fact-checking media itself (Rasmussen Reports, 2016; Graves, 2016).

Due to the salience of candidate personalities (Holian & Prysby, 2015) and controversies (Patterson, 2016) throughout news media election coverage, these varying realities surrounding this election can be expected to have had at least some influence on how voters formed their evaluations of the character attributes of these two candidates. Indeed, national polls illustrate that voters overall held severely low opinions of honesty and trustworthiness for both Trump and Clinton (Newport, 2016a), although these assessments were heavily moderated by party affiliation (Huang, et al., 2016). Furthermore, voters' perceptions of leadership strength appeared to play a particularly salient role in voters' electoral choice, most notably for Trump voters through their faith in him to "bring about change," while Clinton's voters largely placed their value in her "right experience" quality (Shepard, 2016; Huang, et al., 2016).

Rationale and Hypotheses

While a great deal of electoral corruption support literature acknowledges that dishonesty is a factor of political corruption—with many studies measuring dishonesty as an indication of corruption—corruption and dishonesty do not always indicate the same thing. Political corruption, within this line of research, is commonly defined as the “misuse or the abuse of public office for private gains,” and is empirically manifested through “fraud, misappropriation of public funds, or the acceptance of bribes (de Vries & Solaz, 2017, p. 392). Honesty, as it is conceptualized as a candidate character attribute, refers to someone who “does not misrepresent facts, who does not bend the truth, and who is not deceptive in his or her statements” (Holian & Prysby, 2015, p. 28).

While electing apparently corrupt politicians into office is not as common in America as it appears to be in some other democratic systems, American voters have consistently elected and re-elected candidates into office who are empirically—and to increasing degrees—dishonest (Greenberg, 2016). Despite this trend, polls suggest that within the 2016 election, political dishonesty was not always punished by voters. Despite fact-checking evidence or historical media accounts to the contrary, at least some of Trump and Clinton’s voters believed them to be honest (Langer, et al., 2016; Newport, 2016a), while others cast their vote despite strongly distrusting their chosen candidate (Saad, 2016; Pew, September 2016). Contending that such voter evaluations are parallel to those suggested in the previously discussed voter corruption support literature, this study suspects that the two rationales voters use to elect apparently corrupt politicians may also be at play when voters vote for apparently dishonest candidates.

This research thus seeks to determine whether voter rationalization of candidate dishonesty in the 2016 election followed similar processes as that of candidate corruption, as proposed by Winters and Weitz-Shapiro's information and trade-off hypotheses (2013). Did at least some voters cast their vote because they believed their preferred candidate to be honest? Did others support their candidate despite indications of dishonesty because they perceived the candidate to be a strong enough leader to achieve desirable goals? In order to address these questions, this study draws on scholarship of candidate character traits in order to conceptualize honesty and leadership strength. As Holian & Prysby (2015) summarize, the quality of honesty in a candidate indicates someone who "does not misrepresent facts, who does not bend the truth, and who is not deceptive in his or her statements" (p. 28), while leadership indicates someone who is able to "take decisive actions, to get things done, and to inspire and lead the nation" (p. 27). Drawing from this, the present study conceptualizes honesty as "not bending the truth" and strong leadership as the ability to "get things done."

The primary interest of this study lies in the mechanisms by which perceptions of honesty or leadership strength might have influenced voters' electoral choice. As a tool for analyzing not simply whether or not an effect exists, but rather the process through which one variable exerts its influence on another, *mediation* is often used "to explain how a given effect occurs" (Preacher & Hayes, 2008, p. 2). Because mediation illustrates the "process" by which two variables are associated and influenced by one or more intervening variables (Preacher & Hayes, 2008, p. 2), it is an appropriate tool for exploring the process by which perceptions of candidate honesty and leadership strength may have influenced voting decisions.

In defining the pathway through which these perceptions might influence voter behavior, party affiliation stands out as a “long-term, stable, and powerful predictor of individual vote choice” (Graefe, 2013, p. 650). As a factor that is both indicative of voters’ value-defining predispositions while also wielding considerable influence on voters’ electoral choice, party affiliation and its relationship to voter behavior provide a stable framework within which to test the influence of expectedly less-influential factors. The following study will therefore test whether voter evaluations of certain candidate traits causally influenced this connection between party affiliation and voter behavior.

Hypotheses. Seeking to thus assess correlational evidence of whether partisan voters’ perceptions of certain candidate traits influenced voter behavior, this research poses the following three hypotheses. While the implied model describes processes consisting of variables linked in conditional or causal chains, the analysis does not assess causality in any rigorous way. Rather, the analysis assesses correlation, acknowledging that correlation is a necessary, but not sufficient, aspect of causality.

Information Hypothesis (H1). As a test of the information hypothesis, as termed by Winters and Weitz-Shapiro (2013), this study hypothesizes that (H1) perceived candidate honesty independently mediated the connection between party affiliation and voting.

Trade-off Hypothesis (H2 and H3). As a test of Winters and Weitz-Shapiro’s trade-off hypothesis (2013), this study hypothesizes that (H2) perceived candidate strength independently mediated the relationship between party affiliation and voting, and furthermore, that (H3) approval of strong, rule-bending leadership followed

perceived candidate strength in serially mediating the relationship between party affiliation and voting.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Seeking to model the paths by which voters rationalized perceived candidate honesty and strength of leadership in the 2016 presidential election, this study analyzes data from the ANES 2016 Time Series Study, a premier and nationally-representative survey conducted by the University of Michigan that presents data sets of registered voters' attitudes both before and directly after the 2016 presidential election. Variations of process modeling, as developed by Andrew Hayes (e.g., 2013), are employed to determine the mechanisms by which party affiliation and voters' candidate selection may have been causally influenced.

Data

The present study relies on secondary data analyses. Per the ANES study's codebook (ANES, 2017), interviews of eligible U.S. voters took place from September 2016 through January 2017 and were conducted both in-person ($N = 1,181$ pre-election; 1,059 post-election) and online ($N = 3,090$ pre-election; 2,590 post-election).

This study evaluates only the responses of those who indicated they would vote for Republican candidate Donald Trump ($N = 1,129$, or 31% of all voters) or Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton ($N = 1,252$, or 34% of all voters). After adjusting for these two categories, as well as for missing cases and "I don't know" responses, the final weighted samples for analysis range from $N = 2,438$ to $N = 2,450$ across each of the proposed tests. Each sample is weighted according to the ANES recommended weighting variable for analyses involving both pre- and post-election data sets (ANES, 2017, p. 6)

Independent / Input Variable: Party Affiliation

The independent input variable (X) was a measurement of party affiliation, which this research limited to Republican and Democrat. This variable was adapted as a categorical indicator from a scale survey question (V161156) that specifically assessed the strength of respondents' Republican or Democrat affiliation: "If you consider yourself a Republican (Democrat), would you call yourself a strong Republican (Democrat) or a not very strong Republican (Democrat)?" (ANES, 2017, p. 236). This approach was employed in an effort to account for the full spectrum of voters who might identify with either party, including weak affiliates who may have hesitantly answered "Independent," "Other party," or "Don't know" in the categorical question of the survey's party identification battery (V161155).

The survey's scale measure was re-coded to range from 0 to 6. Republican affiliation averaged 2.80 with a standard deviation of 2.14, and Democratic affiliation averaged 3.20 with a standard deviation of 2.14 (see Table 1).

Dependent / Outcome Variable: Voter Behavior

The dependent outcome variable (Y) was voter behavior, which was measured by *post*-election survey responses indicating the respondent voted for either Donald Trump (47.4%) or Hillary Clinton (52.6%).

Mediating Variables

Potential mediating variables were adapted from *pre*-election survey questions that indicated voters' perceptions of candidate integrity and competence (among other character traits), which were used to examine the information hypothesis. Additionally, one final *pre*-election survey response indicating voters value preference between

leadership and rule-adherence was used to examine voters' willingness to overlook dishonest (as amoral) behavior, and therefore the trade-off hypothesis. Table 1 contains means and standard deviations for each of these variables.

M1: *Strong Leader*. Participants of the *pre*-election survey were asked to evaluate how well the phrase "he/she provides strong leadership" described each candidate (V161159, V161164). Response options were re-coded on a 5-point scale ranging from "Not well at all" (0) to "Extremely well" (4). As previously noted, this trait is conceptualized as the ability to "get things done."

M2: *Honest*. Participants of the *pre*-election survey were asked to evaluate how well the phrase "is honest" described each candidate (V161162, V161167). Response options were re-coded on a 5-point scale ranging from "Not well at all" (0) to "Extremely well" (4). As previously noted, this trait is conceptualized as "not bending the truth."

M3: *Knowledgeable*. Participants of the *pre*-election survey were asked to evaluate how well the phrase "is knowledgeable" described each candidate (V161161, V161166). Response options were re-coded on a 5-point scale ranging from "Not well at all" (0) to "Extremely well" (4). Per Holian & Prysby (2015), this trait is conceptualized as a measure of competence.

M4: *Caring*. Participants of the *pre*-election survey were asked to evaluate how well each candidate "really cares about people like you " (V161160, V161165). Response options were re-coded on a 5-point scale ranging from "Not well at all" (0) to "Extremely well" (4). Per Holian & Prysby (2015), this trait is conceptualized as a measure of empathy.

M5: Frankness. Participants of the *pre*-election survey were asked to evaluate how well the phrase “speaks his/her mind” described each candidate (V161163, V161168). Response options were re-coded on a 5-point scale ranging from “Not well at all” (0) to “Extremely well” (4). Per Holian & Prysby (2015), this trait is conceptualized as a measure of integrity.

M6: Temperament. Participants of the *pre*-election survey were asked to evaluate how well each candidate is “even-tempered” (V161169, V161170). Response options were re-coded on a 5-point scale ranging from “Not well at all” (0) to “Extremely well” (4). Per Holian & Prysby (2015), this trait is conceptualized as a measure of competence.

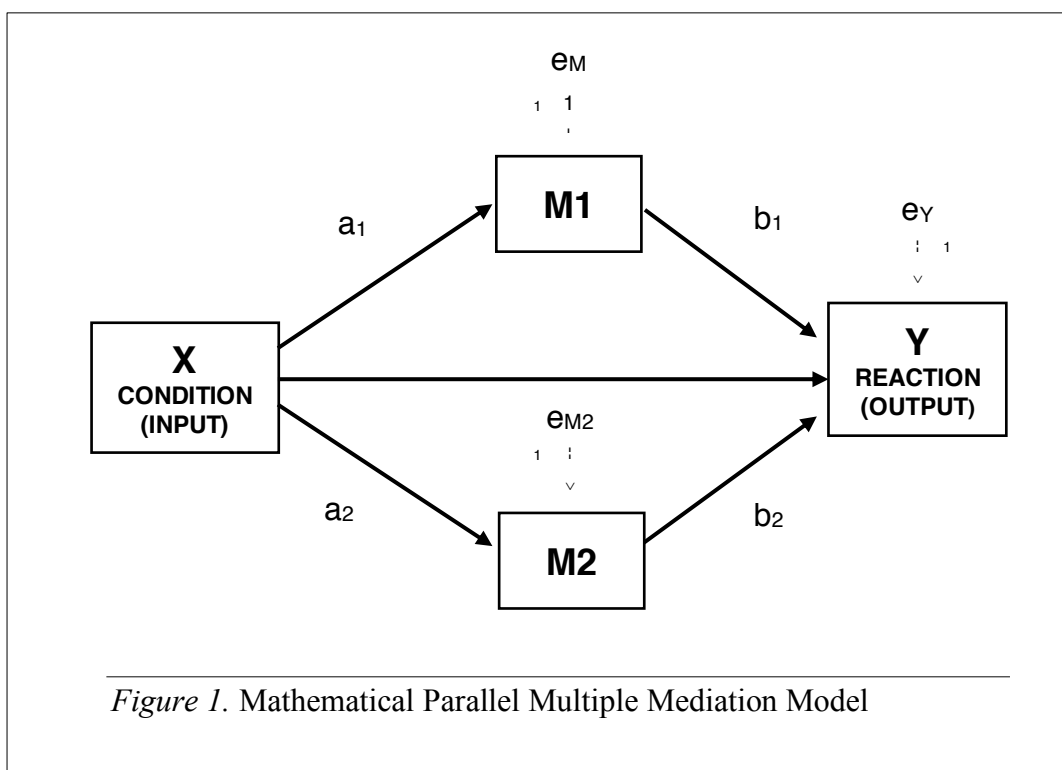
M7: OK With Strong, Rule-Bending Leader. Participants of the *post*-election survey were asked to evaluate to what extent they agreed that “having a strong leader in government is good for the United States even if the leader bends the rules to get things done” (V162263). Response options were re-coded to range from “Less OK” (0) to “More OK” (4). In accordance with this study’s conceptualization of honesty as “not bending the truth,” this variable is conceptualized as an indicator of voters’ “perceived dishonesty,” as a willingness to trade-off dishonesty for strong leadership.

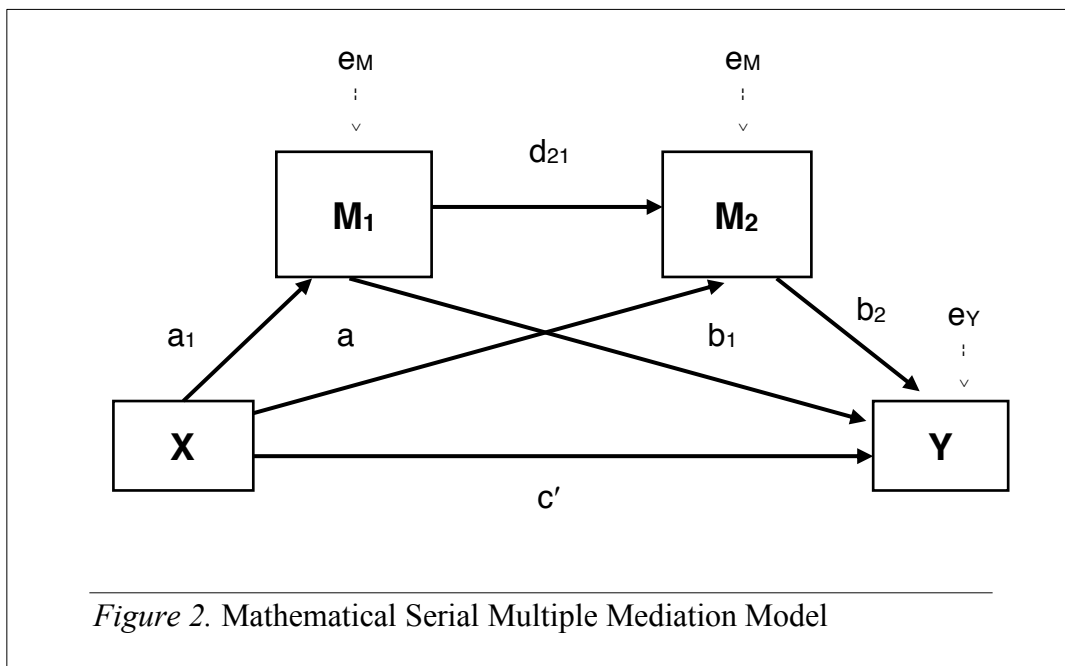
Analysis

The hypotheses were tested through multiple mediator process modeling, using Andrew Hayes’ process macro (2013). While other suitable methodologies could have been used to test the study’s hypotheses (including, for example, structural equation modeling), Hayes’s process modeling macro offers a convenient method of specifying and testing the requisite models, and further offers some desirable features that are absent

in other tools, such as the ability to generate bootstrap confidence intervals for products of parameters (Hayes, 2013).

Thus, multiple mediator process modeling was chosen for its convenient ability to measure, robustly, not only the degree of influence (indirect effect) of a variable on an expected pathway, but also to measure that influence in relation to other potential influencers. For this research, two forms of multiple mediator process models were used to investigate the proposed hypotheses: The *parallel mediation model*, which is useful for simultaneously estimating the indirect effects among multiple independent mediators that may be correlated but not causally linked (see Figure 1), and the *serial mediation model*, which models mediators that operate in tandem to causally influence the relationship between two variables (see Figure 2) (Hayes, 2013, p. 125, 143).





First, each variable was re-coded by shifting response measurement scales in order to establish measurement consistency and interpretive clarity. Missing values (No answer, “Incomplete,” “Refused,” or “Don’t know”) were recoded as “999” so as not to be included in the analyses. Accuracy in recoding was checked with cross-tabulations for each variable. Descriptive statistics tests were run to determine frequencies of each variable (see Table 1).

Four separate analyses were then run using Andrew Hayes’s (e.g., 2013) PROCESS macro for SPSS. Each test for Trump voters placed Republican affiliation (X) as the input variable and Voted for Trump (Y) as the output; each test for Clinton voters placed Democrat affiliation (X) as the input variable and Voted for Clinton (Y) as the

output. As a test of the information hypothesis (H1), parallel multiple mediation analyses tested the following mediating variables for both Trump ($N = 2,438$, Model = 4) and Clinton ($N = 2,445$, Model = 4): Strong Leader, Honest, Knowledgeable, Caring, Frankness, and Temperament. As a test of the trade-off hypothesis (H2 and H3), serial multiple mediation analyses tested two mediating variables for both Trump ($N = 2,448$, Model = 6) and Clinton ($N = 2,450$, Model = 6): Strong Leader and OK With Strong, Rule-Bending Leader. The process modeling for each test assessed significance using bootstrapping with 10,000 samples and a confidence interval of 95%.

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Trump Voters</u>		<u>Clinton Voters</u>	
	<u>Mean (M)</u>	<u>Standard Deviation (SD)</u>	<u>Mean (M)</u>	<u>Standard Deviation (SD)</u>
(X) Party Affiliation	2.80	2.14	3.20	2.14
(M1) Strong Leader	1.55	1.46	1.74	1.41
(M2) Honest	1.28	1.35	1.07	1.24
(M3) Knowledgeable	1.32	1.30	2.44	1.29
(M4) Caring	1.11	1.33	1.49	1.40
(M5) Frankness	3.18	1.20	1.90	1.29
(M6) Temperament	0.81	1.08	1.95	1.30
(M7) OK With Strong, Rule-bending Leader	1.90	1.24	1.90	1.20

Note. Response measures were measured on a scale of 0 – 4, with higher values indicating greater perceived descriptiveness.

To the extent that the information hypothesis is apparent, and voters demonstrate sincere belief that their candidate is honest, the results of the parallel multiple mediation analyses are expected to elicit a positive and statistically significant regression coefficient (effect) for the mediating variable Honest (M2). To the extent that the trade-off hypothesis is apparent, and voters demonstrate willingness to accept dishonest rule-bending in exchange for strong leadership, the results of the serial multiple mediation analyses are expected to elicit several patterns in the data. Significantly positive regression coefficients (effects) are expected to emerge between first, Party Affiliation (X) and Strong Leader (M2), followed by Strong Leader (M2).

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Through multiple mediator process modeling, this research suggests several mediating influences between party affiliation and voting behavior in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Support for the information hypothesis (H1) was found in the models for Trump and Clinton voters, while support for the trade-off hypothesis was mixed: H2 was supported in both candidates' voter models, whereas H3 was only supported in the Trump voter model.

Information Model (Parallel Mediation)

As a test of the information hypothesis (H1), the information model for both Trump (Fig. 3) and Clinton (Fig. 4) voters indicates that honesty did indeed mediate the relationship between voters' party affiliation and vote choice.

The most pertinent data from these the parallel mediation analyses related to the direct and indirect effects of the input (X) and mediating variables (M1 – M6) on the output variable (Y). Specifically, the regression coefficient value ("effect") indicated positive or negative association, and the bootstrap interval ("BootLLCI and BootULCI") indicated significance by yielding a range entirely above or below zero (see Table 2).

Direct Effects. As expected, a great deal of the variance in voter behavior was explained by party affiliation. The direct effect of party affiliation (X) on voter behavior (Y) for Republican affiliation explained 92% of the variation of voting for Trump. For Clinton voters, the direct effect of Democrat affiliation on voting for Clinton accounted for 79% of this variation.

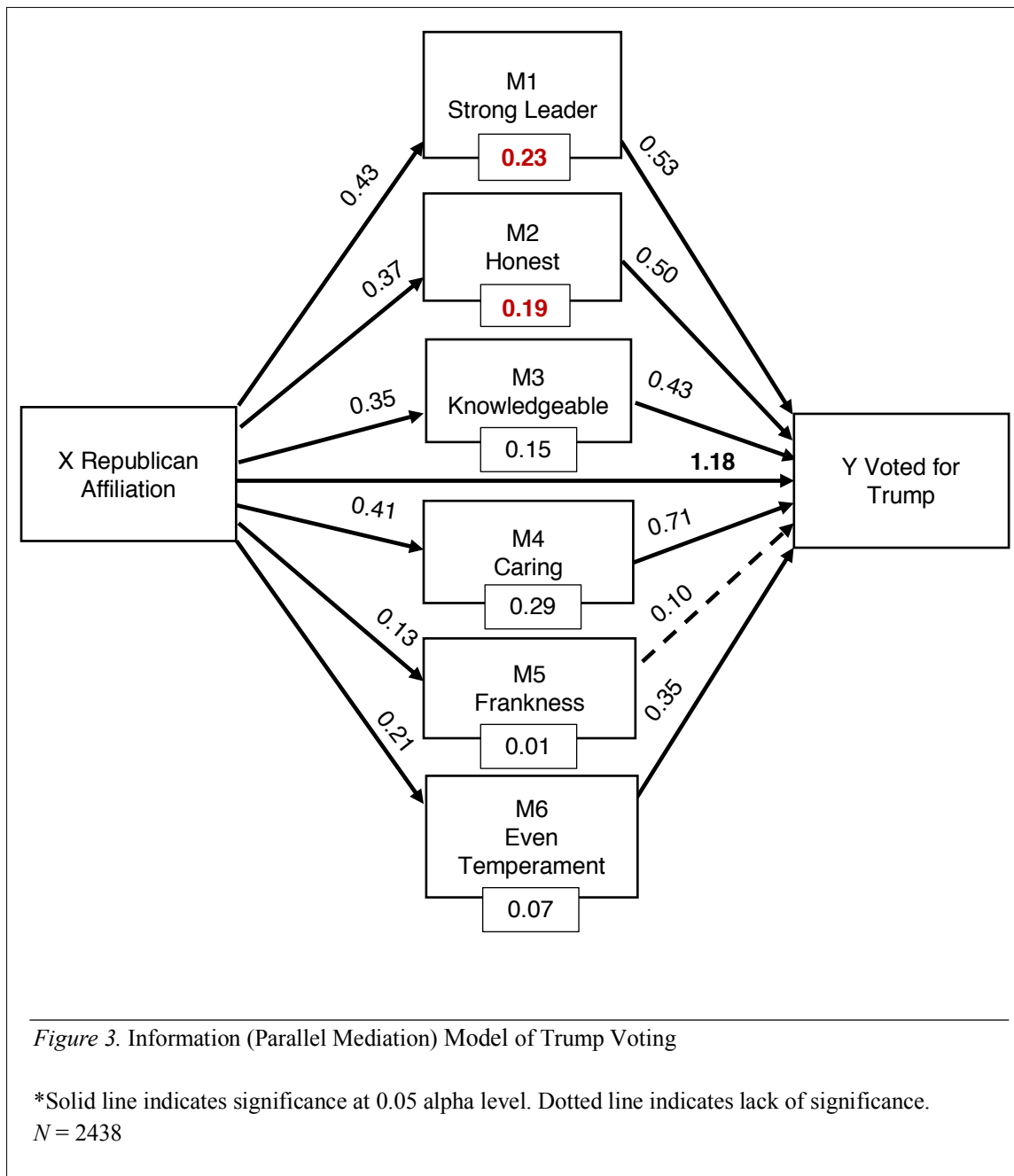
Table 2				
<i>Effects of Party Affiliation (X) on Voter Behavior (Y): PROCESS Effect Coefficient Values and Significance Intervals of Parallel Multiple Mediation Analyses</i>				
Trump Voters			Clinton Voters	
<u>Variables</u>	<u>Effect</u> <u>(coefficient)</u>	<u>Bootstrap</u> <u>Range</u> <u>LLCI - ULCI</u>	<u>Effect</u> <u>(coefficient)</u>	<u>Bootstrap</u> <u>Range</u> <u>LLCI - ULCI</u>
(X) Party Affiliation (Direct Effects of X on Y)	0.92	0.81 – 1.02	0.79	0.68 – 0.90
(M1) Strong Leader	0.23	0.15 – 0.31	0.23	0.13 – 0.33
(M2) Honest	0.19	0.11 – 0.26	0.30	0.20 – 0.40
(M3) Knowledgeable	0.15	0.07 – 0.23	0.14	0.07 – 0.21
(M4) Caring	0.29	0.20 – 0.39	0.12	0.02 – 0.23
(M5) Frankness*	0.01	-0.01 – 0.04	-0.00	-0.04 – 0.04
(M6) Temperament	0.07	0.02 – 0.13	0.15	0.08 – 0.22
Total Indirect Effects of X on Y	0.95	0.82 – 1.10	0.93	0.82 – 1.04
Nagelkrk of X on Y	0.87		0.85	
<i>Note.</i> Effects are measured out of 1, and significance is indicated by a bootstrap range that does not contain 0.				
*Not significant				

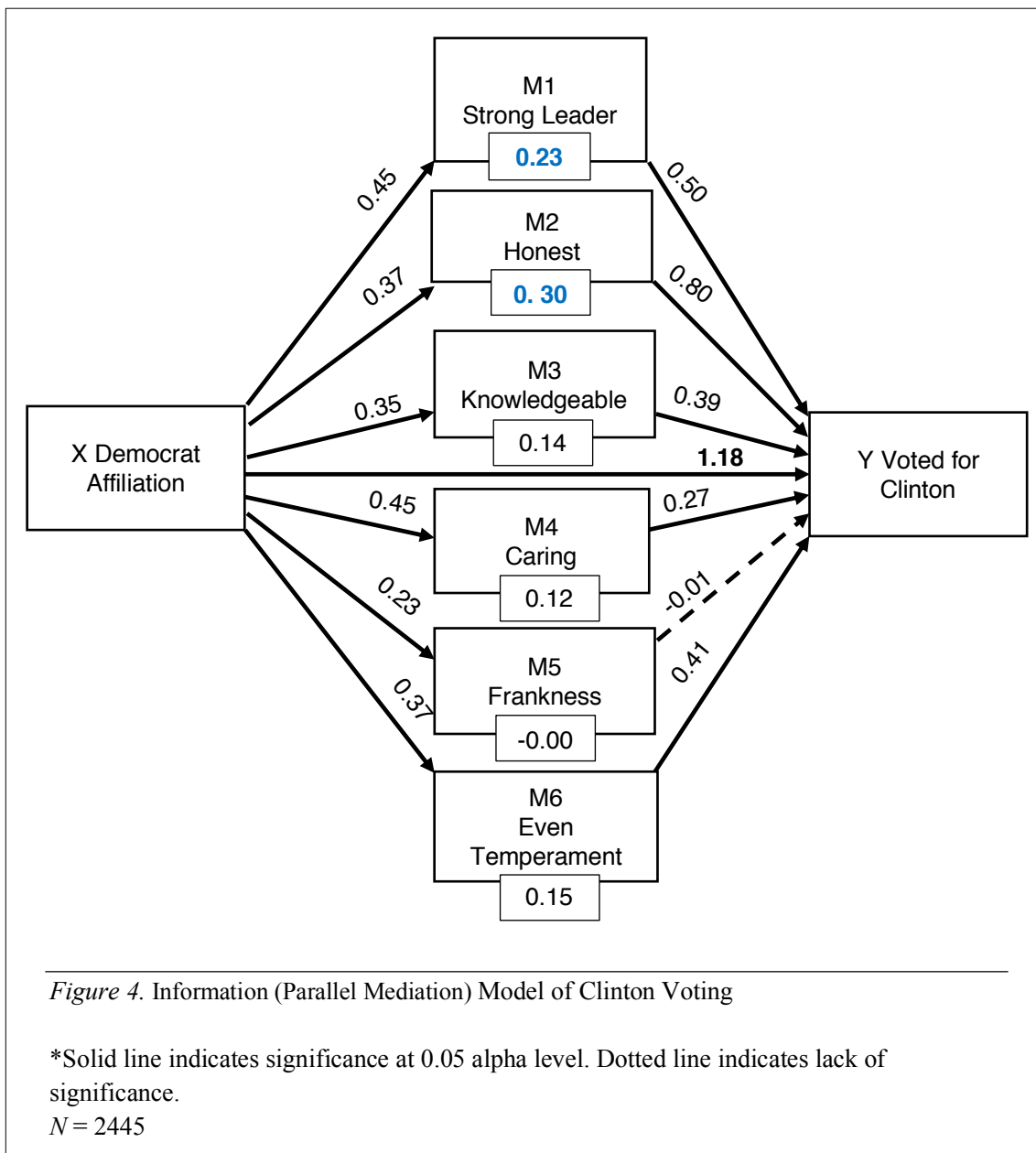
Indirect Effects. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate that Leadership and Honest were not only significant, but they were among the strongest mediators of the relationship between party affiliation and voter behavior. All the mediators in both models were significant, with the exception of Frankness. In the Trump model (Fig. 3), but not in the Clinton

model (Fig. 4), Caring (0.29 Trump; 0.12 Clinton) emerged as a mediator comparable in strength to Strong Leader (0.23 Trump; 0.23 Clinton) and Honest (0.19 Trump; 0.30 Clinton). In another difference between the Trump and Clinton models, Even Temperament (0.07) was a significant but negligible mediator in the Trump model compared to its greater role in the Clinton model (0.15).

Thus, all of the tested mediators except for Frankness appear to be reasons for the link between party affiliation and voting for either Trump or Clinton. Most important to Trump voters were—in order of strength—Caring (0.29), Strong Leader (0.23), Honest (0.19), and Knowledgeable (0.15), while Even Temperament (0.07) appeared with only a very weak influence. Most important to Clinton voters were—in order of strength—Honest (0.30), Strong Leader (0.23), Even Temperament (0.15), Knowledgeable (0.14), and Caring (0.12).

Full Model. Overall, the full information model accounts for a considerable portion of the variation in voter behavior. The full model for Trump voters explained 87% of the variation in voting for Trump ($Nagelkerke = 0.87$), while the full model for Clinton voters explained 85% ($Nagelkerke = 0.85$). This suggests that party affiliation, when also accounting for favorable perceptions of each candidate's honesty, leadership strength, knowledge, empathy, frankness, and temperament, was highly predictive of partisan voters' vote choice for both Trump and Clinton.





Trade-off Model (Serial Mediation)

As a test of the trade-off hypothesis (H2 and H3), the trade-off model for Trump voters (Fig. 5) indicates that perceived leadership strength (H2) joined voter approval of a strong leader who bends the rules to get things done to serially mediate the relationship between Republican affiliation and voting for Trump (H3). These results support both H2 and H3. However, the results for Clinton voters (Fig. 6) do not support the trade-off hypothesis. In the Clinton model, H2 was supported while H3 was not.

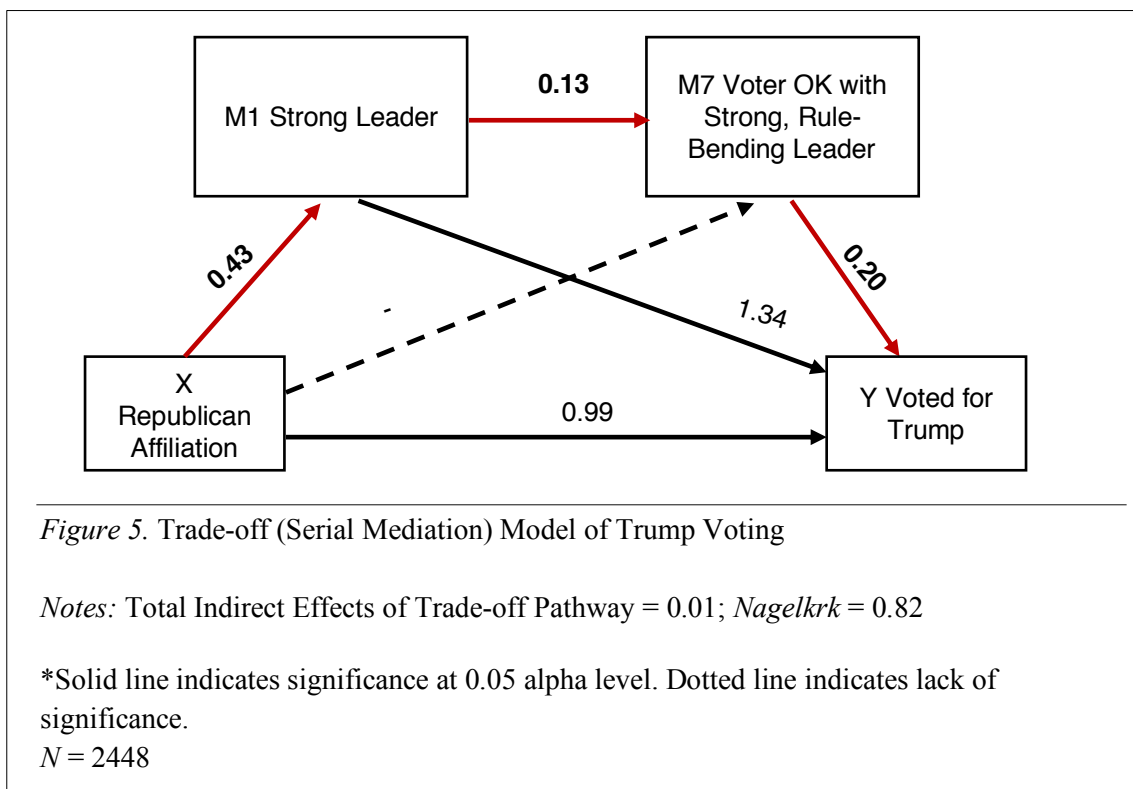
The most pertinent data from the serial mediation analyses related to the direct and indirect effects of the input (X) and mediating variables (M1 and M7) on the output variable (Y). As in the parallel mediation analyses, the regression coefficient value (“effect”) indicated positive or negative association, and the bootstrap interval (“BootLLCI and BootULCI”) indicated significance by yielding a range entirely above or below zero (see Table 3). Specific to this model, the significance of the pathways that formed among these relationships directed the success of the model.

Trump Voter Model. Figure 5 illustrates that in the trade-off model for Trump voters, the entire serially-mediated pathway was both positive and significant, thus supporting the trade-off hypothesis (H2 and H3).

H2 Supported. Specifically, H2 was supported in that the link between Republican affiliation and voting for Trump was positively and significantly mediated by Strong Leader (0.43). In this model, this indirect effect ($X \rightarrow M1 \rightarrow Y$) was the strongest predictor of voting for Trump, outside the direct effect ($X \rightarrow Y$) of Republican affiliation (0.99) (see Table 3).

Table 3				
<i>Effects of Party Affiliation (X) on Voter Behavior (Y): PROCESS Effect Coefficient Values and Significance Intervals of Serial Multiple Mediation Analyses</i>				
Trump Voters			Clinton Voters	
<u>Pathway</u>	<u>Effect</u> <u>(coefficient)</u>	<u>Bootstrap</u> <u>Range</u> <u>LLCI - ULCI</u>	<u>Effect</u> <u>(coefficient)</u>	<u>Bootstrap</u> <u>Range</u> <u>LLCI - ULCI</u>
X → Y	0.99	0.89 – 1.08	0.92	0.82 – 1.01
X → M1 (H2, leg 1; H3, leg 1)	0.43	0.41 – 0.45	0.46	0.44 – 0.48
M1 → Y (H2, leg 2)	1.34	1.20 – 1.49	0.46	0.44 – 0.48
M1 → M7 (H3, leg 2)	0.13	0.09 – 0.18	-0.01	-0.14 – -0.05
M7 → Y (H3, leg 3)	0.19	0.06 – 0.32	-0.27	-0.41 – -0.14
X → M7	-0.00	*-0.03 – 0.03	-0.01	*-0.04 – 0.02
X → M1 → Y (H2 total)	0.58	0.51 – 0.65	0.61	0.53 – 0.69
X → M1 → M7 → Y (H3 total)	0.01	0.00 – 0.02	0.01	0.01 – 0.02
X → M7 → Y	-0.00	*-0.01 – 0.01	-0.00	*-0.00 – 0.01
Total Indirect Effects of X on Y	0.59	0.52 – 0.67	0.62	0.55 – 0.70
Nagelkrk of X on Y	0.83		0.82	
<i>Note.</i> Effects are measured out of 1, and significance is indicated by a bootstrap range that does not contain 0.				
*Not significant				

H3 Supported. The serial mediation model also supported H3, and thus the full trade-off hypothesis, in that perceptions of strong leadership and approval of a strong leader bending the rules to get things done were both serial mediators of the relationship between Republican affiliation and voting for Trump ($X \rightarrow M1 \rightarrow M7 \rightarrow Y$). All pathways in the model were positive and significant except for the path between Republican affiliation and approval of a strong, but rule-bending leader, in which no significant direct association was found after accounting for the two mediators in the model ($X \rightarrow M7$).



The effects of the full trade-off pathway ($X \rightarrow M1 \rightarrow M7 \rightarrow Y$) were significant, but small. The total indirect effects of the trade-off pathway were only just above zero (0.01). In this pathway, the serial link between rule-bending approval and voting for Trump (0.20) was stronger than the preceding link between perceptions of strong leadership and approval of a strong, rule-bending leader (0.13). The strongest link in this pathway emerged between Republican affiliation and Strong Leader (0.43). Overall, the full serial mediation model accounts for a considerable portion (83%) of the variation in voting for Trump ($Nagelkrk = 0.83$).

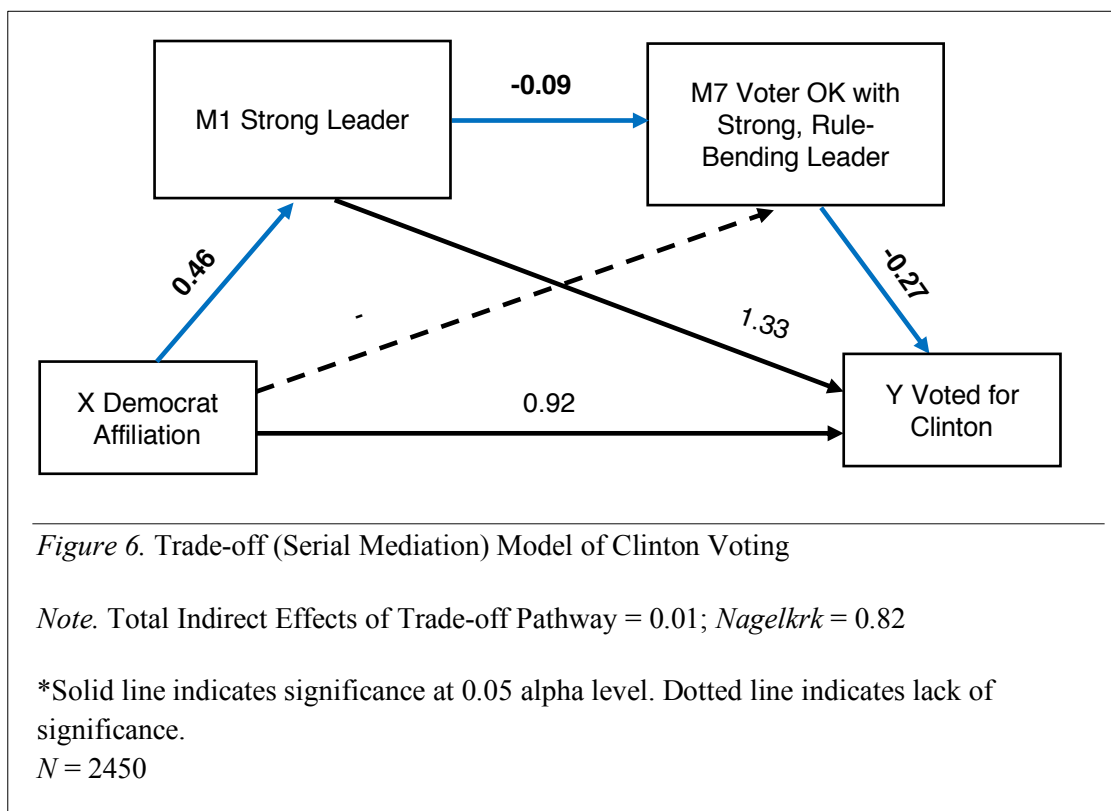
This model suggests three independent paths that Republicans took when voting for Trump. The first path indicates that a great majority supported him out of either partisan loyalty or other reasons unaccounted for in this model ($X \rightarrow Y$). The second path indicates that a sizable number of Republicans voted for Trump because they believed him to be a strong leader ($X \rightarrow M1 \rightarrow Y$). The third path indicates that a smaller, yet significant number of Republicans believed Trump to be a strong leader, and further approved of a strong leader who “bends the rules to get things done” ($X \rightarrow M1 \rightarrow M2 \rightarrow Y$). Voters who followed this latter path provide support for the trade-off hypothesis by demonstrating a willingness to trade-off dishonest rule-bending for strong leadership that was expected to provide valuable outcomes—even if not by honorable means.

Clinton Voter Model. Figure 6 illustrates that in the trade-off model for Clinton voters, the serial mediation model turned out exactly the same as in the Trump model, except that the serially-mediated path turned negative, thus failing to support the full trade-off hypothesis.

H2 Supported. Specifically, H2 was supported in that the link between Democrat affiliation and voting for Clinton was positively and significantly mediated by Strong Leader (0.46). As in the Trump model, this indirect effect ($X \rightarrow M1 \rightarrow Y$) was the strongest predictor of voting for Trump, outside the direct effect ($X \rightarrow Y$) of Democrat affiliation (0.92) (see Table 3).

H3 Not Supported. Unique to Clinton voters, the serial mediation model failed to support H3, and thus the full trade-off hypothesis, in that perceptions of strong leadership (-0.09) and approval of a strong leader bending the rules to get things done (-0.27) were not found to positively mediate the relationship between Democrat affiliation and voting for Clinton ($X \rightarrow M1 \rightarrow M7 \rightarrow Y$). Rather, these two mediators were found to *negatively* mediate this relationship. As in the Trump model, no evidence was found of a direct association between Democrat affiliation and approval of a strong, but rule-bending leader while accounting for the two mediators in the model ($X \rightarrow M7$).

Further alike to the Trump model, the effects of the full trade-off pathway ($X \rightarrow M1 \rightarrow M7 \rightarrow Y$) were significant, but small. The total indirect effects of the trade-off pathway were also just above zero (0.01). In this pathway, the serial link between rule-bending approval and voting for Clinton (-0.27) was also stronger than the preceding link between perceptions of strong leadership and approval of a strong, rule-bending leader (-0.09). The strongest link in this pathway similarly emerged between Democrat affiliation and Strong Leader (0.46). Overall, the full serial mediation model accounts for an equally large portion (82%) of the variation in voting for Clinton, as was seen in the Trump model ($Nagelkerk = 0.82$).



This model suggests only two independent paths by which Democrats voted for Clinton, and further highlights the negative influence of strong but rule-bending leadership on partisan support for Clinton. The first path indicates that a great majority of voters voted for Clinton out of either partisan loyalty or other reasons unaccounted for in this model ($X \rightarrow Y$). The second path indicates that a considerable number of Democrats voted for Clinton because they perceived her to be a strong leader ($X \rightarrow M1 \rightarrow Y$). Contrary to the trade-off hypothesis, however, this model suggests that not only were voters who perceived Clinton to be a strong leader *less* likely to approve of strong but rule-bending leadership, these voters were further *less* in favor of associating Clinton support with the approval of bending the rules “to get things done.”

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This research has examined the paths by which voters rationalized perceptions of candidate honesty and leadership strength when deciding to vote for either Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton in the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Specifically, this study tests whether voter rationality of the candidates' perceived honesty follows the information or trade-off pathways that have been hypothesized to explain voter support of candidate corruption (Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013). Through multiple mediator process modeling of ANES data, this study finds evidence of the information pathway in the models for both Trump and Clinton voters, whereas evidence of the trade-off pathway is evident only in the model for Trump voters. The results therefore provide interestingly mixed support for this study's original assumption—that voter regard for political dishonesty is similar to that of political corruption.

Information Model

The findings in the model for both Trump and Clinton voters support the information hypothesis (H1) in that some voters believed their candidate to be honest, thereby demonstrating either a lack of access to high-quality information about their dishonest behavior, or else a motivation to disbelieve such evidence as non-credible. Although the factors behind various voters' lack of information is beyond the scope of this study, the literature on electoral corruption support provides several possible implications, such as low levels of education or political sophistication as constrictions on voters' access to information about the candidates' character, or the skills necessary to be able to discern credible from non-credible sources (Weitz-Shapiro & Winters, 2017). Another reasonable explanation based on this literature suggests that voters disbelieved

information about candidate honesty because they strongly distrust the credibility of mass media (Swift, 2016; de Sousa & Moriconi, 2013; Winters & Weitz-Shapiro, 2013; Peters & Welch, 1980; Rundquist, et al., 1977).

These findings further make sense within many information hypothesis studies' findings on the influence of partisanship. As many scholars have noted, partisanship plays a significant role in motivating voters to disbelieve information about their preferred candidates' corrupt behavior (Muñoz, et al., 2016; Anduiza, et al., 2013; Chang & Kerr, 2010). Similarly, the findings in this study indicate that higher perceptions of honesty positively influenced partisan vote choice, meaning that partisan voters who believed their candidate to be honest were therefore significantly more likely to vote for their party's candidate because of these positive candidate character evaluations.

In finding that honesty and the other tested variables (besides Frankness) were significant mediators of vote choice, the information model also supports research that indicates the influence of candidate character traits on voter behavior (Holian & Prysby, 2015; Graefe, 2013; Asher, 1992; Campbell, et al., 1960). In finding honesty to be among the highest rated character traits for both Trump and Clinton voters (Figs. 3 and 4), the information model also supports a number of studies that have found honesty to be a leading presidential quality for voters (Trent, et al., 2017; Holian & Prysby, 2015; Bishin, et al., 2006; Kinder, et al., 1980). Overall, the results indicate that the character trait dimensions of integrity, leadership, and empathy were most prevalent in this election, thereby supporting aggregate studies that have found leadership and empathy to be persistently influential over time (e.g., Holian & Prsyby, 2015).

Trade-off Model

Interestingly, the *trade-off hypothesis*, which proposes that voters are willing to accept rule-bending leadership (or corruption, in the original literature) in exchange for a strong leader who can “get things done,” appeared uniquely applicable to Trump voters, whereas it was not evident among Clinton voters. This study’s mixed support for the trade-off hypothesis suggests an interesting distinction between how partisan supporters of Trump and Clinton value leadership and honesty.

Trump Voters. Unique evidence of the full trade-off pathway in the Trump model indicates that some voters who supported Trump did so because they considered him to be a “strong leader,” while further approving of strong leaders who are willing to “bend the rules to get things done” (see Fig. 5, in red). Interpreted through the scholarship on electoral corruption trade-off, this finding suggests that at least some Trump supporters placed greater value on Trump’s ability to accomplish goals that were important to them than they did on the integrity of the presidential office (e.g., Peters & Welch, 1980). These findings are in line with both exit poll data indicating the salience of leadership in influencing voters’ choice (Shepard, 2016; Huang, et al., 2016), as well as trait ownership theory research suggesting that Republicans are seen to be stronger leaders than Democrats (Hayes, 2005).

When considered within the present context of citizens’ historically low trust in government (Pew Research, 2017), the findings of the trade-off model for Trump voters also make sense in relation to the many studies suggesting a connection between low institutional trust and voter willingness to tolerate corruption (de Sousa & Moriconi, 2013, p. 487; La Porta, et al., 1997; Della Porta & Vannucci, 1999). This suggests that

amidst widespread distrust in the government and its officials to “do what is right” (Pew, 2017) and to act honestly in the interest of the public over self-interests (Pew, 2015) some voters become more likely to be cynical about the honesty of any politician and therefore more willing to overlook dishonesty when voting.

Clinton Voters. In the trade-off model for Clinton voters, the negative associations in the serially-mediated path indicate that the stronger a voter believed Clinton to be as a leader, the less likely that voter would be to approve of a strong, but rule-bending leader (see Fig. 6, in blue). Contrary to the trade-off hypothesis, this model for Clinton voters suggests that not only were voters who perceived Clinton to be a strong leader *less* likely to approve of strong but rule-bending leadership, these voters were further *less* in favor of associating Clinton support with the approval of bending the rules “to get things done.”

These findings suggest that voters’ support for Clinton through strong leadership may have owed to different perceived qualities than the “decisive action and effectiveness” quality that was seen in the Trump model. Holian & Prysby’s (2015) detailed breakdown of the various qualities that comprise each character trait dimension may shed light on what this distinction may be. As exit polls indicated, Democratic voters perceived and valued Clinton’s political and leadership experience and knowledge (Huang, et al., 2016), which Holian & Prysby indicate are qualities of competence—a trait that is often measured and interpreted as leadership. The possibility that voters equated these two qualities when presented with the broad measure of “strong leader” suggests that more sophisticated survey measures may be needed in order to accurately account for voter perceptions of such candidate character traits.

Further advancing the electoral corruption literature's implications for partisanship, (Peters & Welch, 1980; Chang & Kerr, 2010; Anduiza, et al., 2013),

Overall, the findings of the present study's trade-off model indicate a partisan split between voters who are willing to trade-off dishonesty for valuable benefits and those who oppose such a trade-off, and thereby advance the electoral corruption literature's implications for partisanship, (Peters & Welch, 1980; Chang & Kerr, 2010; Anduiza, et al., 2013) The results further suggest a notable division in partisan voters' regard for honesty, which adds an interesting dimension to the existing literature on how partisanship influences voters' evaluations of candidate character (Iyengar, 2016; Hetherington, et al., 2016; Holian & Prysby, 2015; Bartels, 2000).

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

This research has demonstrated that voters' rationalizations of perceived presidential candidate honesty and leadership strength can be explained, in part, by the same two pathways that are commonly proposed to understand why voters support corrupt politicians. The information hypothesis suggests that due to either a lack of or denial of information about these candidates' dishonest behavior, at least some partisan supporters of both Trump and Clinton voted for them because they sincerely believed them to be honest. The trade-off hypothesis suggests that while some Trump voters voted for him because they saw him as a strong leader and didn't mind if a strong leader bends the rules in order to get things done, Clinton voters were unwilling to condone such a trade-off or associate their candidate with dishonest political conduct for the sake of accomplishing desirable goals.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

While this study provides compelling insight for understanding voter rationality in presidential elections, it does so with some limitations. First, the serial effects for the total pathway in the trade-off models were significant, but small (0.01 for each). This could indicate that the model might not explain a large number of voters in either candidate's camp, or perhaps that the phenomenon has been imperfectly measured, or even that the findings were just a unique convergence of circumstances in this election. Further research replicating this methodology would strengthen the study's findings.

Second, while a great deal of research on voter support for corrupt candidates has suggested varying institutional, contextual, and individual factors that contribute to voters' lack of information regarding corruption, the present research is unable to

implicate such factors that may have accounted for voters' lack of information about Trump and Clinton's honesty levels. However, this study does serve as a starting point for future research to further explore voters' valuation of honesty alongside other factors such as voters' levels of education and political sophistication within the context of these electoral corruption support frameworks.

Third, this study's observational approach of using existing data—while useful for assessing a large, nationally-representative population with considerable accuracy—has drawbacks, in that the study had to use operationalizations that are not necessarily designed for measuring exactly the study's key variables. The findings of this study would therefore benefit from future research that employs an original survey or an experimental approach in order to better control what is being measured.

In fact, several of the findings in this study raise the question of whether the measurements that were used actually measured what was expected. For instance, this study found that both Trump and Clinton voters held equally strong perceptions of their candidate as a strong leader (Figs. 3 and 4). While this study followed the literature on candidate character traits (e.g., Holian & Prysby, 2015) in conceptualizing “strong leader” as one who acts decisively, inspires the nation, and is able to “get things done” (p. 27), national exit poll data showed that voters valued Trump most for his ability to “bring about change” and Clinton most for her “right experience” (Huang, et al., 2016). As an indicator of decisive and inspiring leadership, Trump's quality here falls under the scholarly definition of leadership; Clinton's, however does not. According to this scholarship, experience is an indicator of competence, which specifies the ability to “make sound decisions and manage the government effectively” (Holian & Prysby, 2015,

p. 27). Although the literature indicates that many researchers, in noting a conceptual overlap, have often collapsed these two trait dimensions into one, an influential line of studies have argued the necessity of differentiating between the two (e.g., Holian & Prysby, 2015; Kinder, et al., 1980). The present research supports this argument by providing evidence that Trump and Clinton's supporters equally perceived their candidate to be a strong leader. In so doing, though, a limitation arises that the measurements of these qualities might not have been sufficient or accurate.

Similarly, the findings of this study suggest that the measurement of honesty may not have been a sufficient indicator of how voters evaluated their preferred candidate. Fact-checking journalism empirically illustrated a colossal difference between Trump's and Clinton's levels of honesty (Sharockman, 2016), yet voters held equally low opinions of their honesty and trustworthiness (Newport, 2016a). By Holian & Prysby's (2015) account, honesty is only one quality of the character trait dimension of integrity, among others of sincerity, authenticity, trustworthiness, and morality. It stands to reason that voters who perceived their candidate to be honest could have been indicating one of these other qualities, rather than honesty.

A limitation also arises in the measurement of what voters actually mean when they agree that "having a strong leader in government is good for the United States even if the leader bends the rules to get things done" (ANES, 2017). The notion of "bend[ing] the rules" can hold a wide range of possible interpretations for different voters, from breaking conventional norms to shaking up existing regulations or even bending civil and constitutional liberties. While beyond the scope of the present research and the ANES data it employs, future studies that add a measure to narrow down the possible

interpretations of this statement would allow for researchers to draw stronger conclusions.

While the present study is unable to definitively indicate whether or not insufficient measurements were an issue in surveying voter perceptions in this election, this study would benefit from future election research that explores these concepts using different or more sophisticated measures. Furthermore, aggregate studies indicate that ANES has varied its measures for the four trait dimensions over the past fifty years, often from one election to the next (Holian & Prysby, 2015). The present study suggests the need for this survey to add more distinct measures for the dimensions of leadership and competence, as well as honesty, so that researchers can more confidently assess voter opinions across a range of presidential candidates and their character traits.

Finally, due to the novelty of this research, its findings are not decisive enough to determine whether or not these results indicate an actual shift in the overall trend of voter regard for perceptions of candidate honesty and leadership, or if these findings were simply a unique characteristic of this election. Further research in both past and future elections would strengthen the findings and provide insight into this possibility of a trend.

Despite these limitations, this research offers significant contributions to a variety of scholarship that seeks to understand how voters rationalize their vote choice. By demonstrating that dominant explanations for electoral corruption support also appear applicable for explaining voter support for dishonest candidates, this study contributes to the literature in both voter corruption tolerance and voter evaluations of candidate character traits. In finding a unique divide in how partisan supporters of both Trump and Clinton weighed perceptions of honesty against strong leadership, this research further

contributes to the literature on the influence of partisanship and polarization on voter assessments of candidate character. Furthermore, in discovering a distinction between this study and national exit poll data in how voters evaluated their preferred candidates' leadership qualities, this research also contributes to survey research literature by indicating a need for a wider range of measures in order to more accurately capture voters' assessments of candidate character.

Implications of Findings

The results of this study have implications for the role of truth and honesty in modern politics. Fact-checking journalism throughout this election consistently indicated that Trump was very dishonest, while simultaneously demonstrating that Clinton, while not entirely honest, told considerably fewer false or misleading statements (Sharockman, 2016). Despite this, poll data indicating that voters held equally low perceptions of each candidate's honesty suggests that voters either interpreted indications of the candidate's dishonesty differently, or that they weighed its importance in different ways (Newport, 2016a). The present research finds support for both of these possibilities, and thereby appears to indicate a shift in how voters today—or at least in this election—perceive and regard the truth. The common post-truth characterization of the present era points to the reality that society has come to regard facts, and therefore truth, as subjective. Amidst this potentially de-stabilizing environment, it therefore becomes extremely important to understand what values have come to take the place of truth—especially within the context of political leaders with the power to transform both national and global affairs. This research contributes to this endeavor by suggesting that some for Republican voters, leadership strength trumps honesty when partisan goals are on the line. Alternately, some

Democrat voters appear to value leadership strength and partisan goals, but not at the expense of integrity. Further research is needed in order to determine whether these findings are indicative of a trend among Republicans and Democrats, or if they were bespoke to Trump and Clinton supporters in this election.

Furthermore, the findings of the trade-off model for Trump voters have great implications for current and future elections. A handful of special congressional elections in the two years since Trump's election have already witnessed widespread support for Trump-inspired candidates who tout hard-lined leadership amidst overt lies. A prototype for this amped-up, post-truth style of politicking was seen in 2017 in Alabama's Republican Senate candidate Roy Moore, whose brazen and hard-lined approach to partisan issues such as gun reform and immigration were presented at rallies through gun-waving and fearmongering. Additionally, these apparent demonstrations of strength were accompanied by vehement denials of persistent allegations of sexual assault on several minors. Largely due to his conservative stance on issues and perceived competence, many Republicans stoutly defended him by claiming the charges against him were politically motivated, despite investigations into the many victims' claims finding no reason to believe these sources to be non-credible. On the surface, a trade-off effect fueled by partisanship appears to be at play in this recent congressional election, where severe charges of amoral and potentially illegal conduct were perhaps strategically overlooked in favor of expected preferential policy outcomes.

The potential that future candidates will continue to model their political conduct after Trump's success—by disregarding integrity attributes like honesty and instead emphasizing performance ones like strength and loyalty—has troubling implications for

the future of society and democracy in that it ignores the vital role that political honesty plays in strong leadership. Candidates who are elected on inflated campaign promises and blatant disregard for objective facts cannot be expected to follow through on their promises, nor can they be expected to serve the interests of the public or even to make well-informed policy decisions. The over-inflation of a candidate's character traits that misleads voters in believing what that candidate is capable of accomplishing thus points to this study's most important implication: Voters who trade-off candidate honesty for leadership strength when electing an overtly dishonest candidate are not only gambling that the candidate will be as strong and effective a leader as claimed, but also that he or she will be honest enough to follow through on the campaign promises and character assumptions for which supporters cast their vote. This study thus makes clear that in circumstances of trading-off presidential candidate honesty for strong leadership, honesty will always be a factor, and its absence only a reminder of the gamble that a dishonest candidate will show good faith once in office.

In conclusion, it is interesting that a model designed to explain the election of corrupt politicians also appears applicable to explaining the election of dishonest politicians. Dishonesty and corruption are not the same, but it is curious that they appear to be treated as such by some voters—a finding that may shed light on how some voters now view truth. As researchers, politicians, and media pundits alike continue to try to make sense of the apparent shifts in voters' perceptions and voting rationale, this study provides useful models with which this behavior can be better understood, as well as a framework from which future studies can further explore.

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[Koplg.1&utm_referrer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.pewresearch.org%2F](http://www.people-press.org/2015/11/23/beyond-distrust-how-americans-view-their-government/?beta=true&utm_expid=53098246-2.Lly4CFSVQG2lphsg-Koplg.1&utm_referrer=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.pewresearch.org%2F)

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[support-and-have-concerns-about-clinton-and-trump/#survey-report](http://www.people-press.org/2016/09/21/in-their-own-words-why-voters-support-and-have-concerns-about-clinton-and-trump/#survey-report)

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A: IRB EXEMPTION FORM

IRB
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
 Office of Research Compliance,
 010A Sam Ingram Building,
 2269 Middle Tennessee Blvd
 Murfreesboro, TN 37129



IRBN014 – NON-RESEARCH DESIGNATION NOTICE

Friday, March 16, 2018

Principal Investigator	Kimberli Nicole Conro (Student)
Faculty Advisor	Ken Blake
Co-Investigators	Jason Reineke
Investigator Email(s)	knc3m@mtmail.mtsu.edu; ken.blake@mts.edu
Department	Media and Communication
Proposal Title	Is Lying Like Corruption?: Perceived Honesty and Leadership Strength as Negotiated Factors of Voting in the 2016 U.S. Presidential Election
NEW IRB ID	18-0226 OLD IRB ID N/A

Dear Investigator(s),

The above identified research proposal has been reviewed by the MTSU Institutional Review Board (IRB). Based on the information provided to the IRB, this study either does not involve the data collection from living human subjects, or your proposed data collection is not done using a systematic approach to derive generalizable knowledge, or both. The proposed study does not fit the definition of human subjects' research as stated by OHRP (45 CFR 46.102). Since the protocol only involves publicly available de-identified data (*45 CFR 46.102f - non-human subjects*), it is therefore **EXCLUDED** from IRB review and oversight.

Although this study is excluded from the IRB's oversight, we encourage you to adopt best practices in your research, which includes: informed consent; autonomy to participate/decline or to withdraw without retribution; and the right remain anonymous, for all those who interact with you during this study.

We appreciate your time and we wish you very best with your proposal.

Sincerely,

Institutional Review Board
 Middle Tennessee State University