

DO PEOPLE HAVE FEELINGS TOWARD LEADERS ABOUT WHOM THEY SAY THEY KNOW NOTHING?

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Does every voter have feelings about each and every political leader? Do people feel compelled to offer meaningless responses when asked how they feel about leaders about whom they know nothing? There is an extensive literature discussing the presence (or absence) of nonattitudes (for a review, see Kinder 1983). Since Converse's (1964) seminal work on nonattitudes, many researchers have expressed concern that respondents may feel pressured to answer survey questions even if they do not have a real opinion on the subject (Bishop, Tuchfarber, and Oldendich 1986). As a consequence, it is argued that respondents "should be allowed, perhaps even encouraged, to see DK [don't know] as a legitimate response" and that greater use should be made of filter questions "to screen out respondents . . . by making it explicit that DK or no opinion is a perfectly acceptable response" (Schuman and Presser 1981, p. 114).

To our knowledge, there is no similar research on whether people are inclined to provide more or less random answers when they are asked how they feel about political leaders. In this study, we attempt to fill that gap.

The 1997 Canadian election provides a particularly useful opportunity for

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addressing this question since three of the party leaders were new. Under such circumstances, the chances are that some voters would not know much about some of the leaders and would not have formed genuine opinions about them.

The 1997 Canadian Election Study campaign survey asked respondents whether they “know a lot, a little, or nothing at all about” each leader.¹ In the postelection survey, those who said they knew nothing at all about a leader were nevertheless asked how they felt about the person. This allows us to assess the meaning of answers provided by those who claimed not to know anything about a leader.²

We first look at the characteristics of those who claim to know nothing about the leaders. We then examine the responses provided by these people when they were asked how they felt about a leader they had indicated they knew nothing about. And finally we determine whether these responses are meaningful.

The hypothesis we wish to test is that even people who say they know nothing about a leader have real feelings about that leader, and so their responses are meaningful. Because they are uninformed, however, their feelings and their responses are more tentative.

This hypothesis is inspired by Zaller’s (1992) work on the nature of public opinion, which stakes out a middle position between that of Converse and that of his critics. Zaller (1992, p. 94) agrees with Converse that “there is a great deal of uncertainty, tentativeness, and incomprehension in the typical mass survey response,” but he rejects the idea that “most response fluctuation is due to essentially random guessing by people who have no meaningful opinions.” From that perspective, all responses are meaningful but tentative and some responses are more tentative than others.

The hypothesis is consistent with work on attitude strength. A number of studies have shown that “attitudes based on a substantial amount of information are more predictive of subsequent behavior” (Davidson 1995, p. 23). This perspective suggests that attitudes toward a leader will be less consequential among people who feel less informed about that person.

1. The survey was conducted by the Institute for Social Research (ISR) at York University. The ISR interviewed a total of 3,949 eligible voters during the campaign. The response rate was 59 percent. A total of 3,170 of these respondents were reinterviewed after the election. Copies of the questionnaires, technical documentation, and data set can be obtained at www.isr.yorku.ca/ISR.

2. The results reported below exclude the province of Quebec. The Reform Party ran only a dozen token candidates in the province, while the New Democratic Party got only 2 percent of the province’s vote. A parallel analysis cannot be undertaken for Quebec, given the smaller sample size and the smaller proportion of respondents who were uninformed about the leaders of the three major parties in the province (Liberals, Bloc québécois, and Conservatives). The higher levels of self-reported knowledge in Quebec may reflect the fact that all three leaders were Quebecers.

Table 1. The Sources of Feeling Uninformed about the Leaders

Atlantic resident	-.03*
Prairie resident	-.01
British Columbia resident	+.01
High school dropout	+.04***
University graduate	-.04***
Factual general information	-.18***
Interest in politics	-.23***
Media exposure	-.27***
Constant	+.61***
<i>N</i>	2,303
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.28

NOTE.—The entries are regression coefficients.

* Significant at the .10 level (one-tailed test).

*** Significant at the .01 level (one-tailed test).

Who Felt Uninformed about the Leaders?

Seven percent of respondents said they knew nothing about the Liberal leader, Prime Minister Jean Chrétien. The percentage of uninformed about the other “established” leader, Preston Manning (Reform Party), was 15 percent. By contrast, as many as 28 percent admitted not knowing anything about Jean Charest, the new leader of the Conservative Party. And half of the electorate (49 percent) indicated they knew nothing about Alexa McDonough, the leader of the New Democratic Party (NDP).³

Who felt uninformed? The simple answer is: people who do not follow politics (and this specific campaign) closely and who are poorly informed about politics in general. The dependent variable in table 1 corresponds to the proportion of leaders respondents indicated they knew nothing about. The data show that the less educated, the less informed, and those less exposed to the media and less interested in politics in general were more likely to say that they knew nothing about the leaders.⁴ People in Atlantic Canada felt less uninformed, mainly because McDonough, the least known leader, was from that region.

These results make sense. We should note, however, that subjective knowledge about the leaders is as strongly related to subjective level of political

3. These figures come from the postelection survey. The overall level of knowledge was slightly lower in the campaign survey.

4. These results are based on knowledge measured in the postelection survey. Similar findings are obtained with campaign survey data.

interest as to level of factual political knowledge. This raises a question: Were those who said they knew nothing at all about a leader as uninformed as they seemed to indicate?

How Did Those Who Said They Knew Nothing about a Leader Respond?

The first question is whether those who felt uninformed about a leader were willing and able to indicate how they felt about that person. The short answer is yes. A clear majority provided a response even though they had indicated earlier on in the interview that they knew nothing about that person. The percentage varied from 78 percent in the case of Chrétien to 68 percent in the case of McDonough; the average was 74 percent.

Did these people rate the leader about whom they claimed to know nothing more or less positively than those who knew about the leader? In table 2, the dependent variables are respondents' evaluations of each of the four leaders, on a 0–100 scale. The main independent variable is a dummy “feeling uninformed” variable, which equals one for those who said they knew nothing at all about a particular leader. The regressions include, as control variables, party identification and all the variables influencing subjective knowledge that are identified in table 1.⁵ The expectation is that people who identify with a party give the leader of “their” party higher ratings and that those who distrust politicians in general give all leaders lower ratings. Table 2 supports these expectations.⁶ This table also shows that those who felt uninformed about a leader tended to give that leader lower ratings, by 13–14 points.⁷ One possible explanation for this finding is that those who are negatively predisposed toward a leader are not inclined to seek further information about that leader. They might reason: “I do not like that leader and I do not want or need to know more about that person.”

These people have feelings about leaders but feel uninformed about them. Why do they say they know nothing at all about the person? One possibility is that they feel they know very little, close to nothing, and that they think they are not informed enough to say that they know at least a little about the

5. The party identification measure varies with each of the regressions; i.e., there is a dummy for those who identify with the party of the respective leaders.

6. There is one exception: cynicism leads to higher ratings of Manning, the leader of the Reform Party. This is related to the Reform Party's populist appeal (see Nevitte et al. 2000, chap. 4).

7. Regressions in which respondents' overall level of knowledge of the leaders is also included and controlled for produce the same pattern. It is specific lack of knowledge about a particular leader that produces lower ratings. Similar findings were obtained for the three leaders in Quebec. We also ran regressions with an additional “know a lot” dummy variable to determine whether those who felt very well-informed about a leader were also inclined to give that leader higher ratings than those who said they just knew a little. Better-informed respondents did give slightly higher scores, but the differences were small (note that few respondents said they knew a lot about the leaders).

Table 2. The Impact of Feeling Uninformed on Leaders' Ratings

	Chrétien	Charest	McDonough	Manning
Feeling uninformed about a leader	-13.4***	-13.2***	-14.0***	-14.7***
Party identification	+13.7***	+11.2***	+18.5***	+27.7***
Cynicism	-25.3***	-15.7***	-8.2***	+9.9***
Atlantic resident	-5.8***	+5.2***	+9.7***	-2.8
Prairie resident	-6.2***	-6.3***	-2.1	+4.5***
British Columbia resident	-.8	-3.0**	-2.5	-.0
High school dropout	-3.5***	-5.1***	-3.2**	-2.1
University graduate	+2.6**	+5.7***	+2.5*	-2.1
Factual general information	+.7	+.9	-2.3	-4.0*
Interest in politics	-1.8	+1.2	+3.7	+5.1**
Media exposure	+15.1***	+15.2***	+14.6***	+10.1***
Constant	+67.5***	+53.2***	+45.9***	+31.3***
<i>N</i>	2,127	1,985	1,835	2,072
Adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.23	.21	.22	.18

NOTE.—The entries are regression coefficients.

* Significant at the .10 level (one-tailed test).

** Significant at the .05 level (one-tailed test).

*** Significant at the .01 level (one-tailed test).

leader.⁸ A second possibility, suggested by Mondak (2000, p. 62), is that some respondents who lack self-confidence may feel compelled to understate their level of political knowledge and to choose “don’t know” in order not to appear misinformed.

A third possibility is that these people, while they do know something about the leader, are unable to retrieve that piece of information at the time of interview. This is exactly what the on-line model of candidate evaluation (Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995) would lead us to expect: according to that model, people adjust their overall evaluation of candidates in response to campaign events and messages even though that information is stored in long-term memory and is quickly forgotten. From that perspective, people

8. The inference is that if they had been offered a “very little” option, many would have chosen it.

Table 3. Voting Behavior and Leader Ratings among the Informed and the Uninformed

Party	Informed about the Leader			Uninformed about the Leader		
	Positive Leader Rating (%)	Negative Leader Rating (%)	Difference	Positive Leader Rating (%)	Negative Leader Rating (%)	Difference
Liberal	41.1	11.5	29.6***	43.6	12.8	30.8***
<i>N</i>	(1,257)	(383)		(39)	(47)	
Conservative	25.1	7.8	17.3***	11.2	5.0	6.2**
<i>N</i>	(908)	(423)		(196)	(199)	
NDP	28.6	3.5	25.1***	5.5	3.1	2.4*
<i>N</i>	(629)	(311)		(399)	(387)	
Reform	49.8	8.0	41.8***	12.9	6.1	6.8
<i>N</i>	(489)	(654)		(62)	(132)	
Mean	37.9	7.7	30.2	18.3	6.7	11.6

NOTE.—The figures indicate the percentage of the vote obtained by a party in a given group. The uninformed are those who said they knew nothing about a given leader and the informed are those who said they knew a lot or a little about that leader. Ratings of 50 or above (on a 0 to 100 scale) are considered positive and those under 50 negative. NDP = New Democratic Party.

* Significant at the 0.10 level (one-tailed test).

** Significant at the 0.05 level (one-tailed test).

*** Significant at the 0.01 level (one-tailed test).

may have simply forgotten that they did know something about a leader. All this assumes that the responses provided by the uninformed are meaningful.

Did Those Who Said They Knew Nothing about a Leader Provide Meaningful Responses?

We address this question by looking at the relationship between leader ratings and voting behavior among the “informed” and the “uninformed.” We would expect those who say they know nothing about a leader to attach less weight to how they feel about that leader in making up their mind about how to vote. As a consequence, the relationship between leader ratings and vote choice should be weaker among the uninformed.

Table 3 supports these expectations. For all the parties except the Liberals, leader ratings had less impact on the vote among those who said they knew nothing about the party’s leader. At the same time, though, it still made a difference whether those ratings were positive or negative, and, in every case but one, that difference was statistically significant. Take the Conservative vote, for instance. Those who said they knew nothing about their party’s

Table 4. The Impact of Leaders' Ratings on the Vote: Multinomial Logit

	Liberal/NDP	Conservative/NDP	Reform/NDP
NDP rating	-.091***	-.094***	-.139***
McDonough rating	-.040**	-.054**	-.060**
NDP × feeling			
uninformed	-.002	-.011	-.043*
McDonough × feeling			
uninformed	+.003	+.030*	+.025
<i>N</i>	1,289		
Pseudo <i>R</i> ² = .68	.68		

NOTE.—The entries are logistic coefficients. The equations also include evaluations of the three other parties, evaluations of the three other leaders, four party identification dummy variables, all the independent variables included in table 1, a dummy variable for those who said they knew nothing about McDonough, and two interaction terms between factual general information and New Democratic Party (NDP) and McDonough ratings.

* Significant at the .10 level (one-tailed test).

** Significant at the .05 level (one-tailed test).

*** Significant at the .01 level (one-tailed test).

leader (Charest) but nonetheless rated him positively were more likely to vote Conservative (11 percent) than those who rated him negatively (5 percent), for a difference of 6 percentage points. While this difference is statistically significant, the difference in the Conservative vote between those who rated the leader positively and those who gave a negative evaluation is almost three times larger (17 percentage points) among those who said they knew at least a little about him.

The same pattern emerges for three of the four parties. On average, liking the leader increases the probability of voting for a party by 30 points among the informed, compared with only 12 points among the uninformed. Leader ratings make a difference in both groups, but they count less among the uninformed.

These findings support the notion that the responses provided by the uninformed are meaningful but more tentative. However, we still need to establish whether leader ratings have an independent effect on the vote of those who feel uninformed. The observed differences could simply result from differences in party affect or party identification, for example. To pursue this question, we focus on the least well-known leader, NDP's McDonough. If the responses provided by the informed are meaningful but those provided by the uninformed are meaningless, we should observe that evaluations of McDonough affect vote choice in the former group but not in the latter.

Table 4 presents the findings. To make sure that we measure the specific additional impact of McDonough's ratings on the vote, the regressions include

ratings of each of the three other leaders and of each of the four parties, party identification, and all the variables that have been shown to affect subjective knowledge of McDonough (see table 1).

We have also included two interaction terms between “feeling uninformed” on the one hand and NDP and McDonough ratings on the other. If the responses provided by those who feel uninformed about McDonough are as meaningful as those given by the informed, the interaction term with McDonough ratings should be nil, implying that the independent impact of leader ratings is the same in the two groups. If the responses of the uninformed are meaningless, the coefficient of the interaction term should be of the opposite sign but of the same magnitude as that of the McDonough rating, implying that evaluations of McDonough have no specific impact on the propensity to vote NDP in that group. If the responses of the uninformed are meaningful but more tentative, the coefficient of the interaction term should be of the opposite sign but smaller than that of the McDonough rating, indicating that feelings about her count but have less weight among those who know nothing about her. The setup also incorporated two interaction terms between factual information on the one hand and NDP and McDonough ratings on the other. We have included these interaction terms to check whether it is subjective or objective lack of knowledge that affects the relative weight of leader evaluations.

The first two coefficients in table 4 indicate the impact of NDP and McDonough ratings on the propensity to vote Liberal, Conservative, or Reform rather than NDP, among those who felt informed about McDonough.⁹ It can be seen that, among the informed, each of the six coefficients is statistically significant.

The last two coefficients concern the interaction terms with feeling uninformed about the NDP leader. Evaluations of McDonough had a smaller impact on the propensity to vote Conservative or Reform rather than NDP among those who said they knew nothing about her. The uninformed appear to have given greater weight to how they felt about the NDP.¹⁰ These results support the notion that evaluations of McDonough did count in the vote decision of the uninformed, but that they had a smaller effect. Furthermore, it appears that it is subjective lack of knowledge about the NDP leader rather than general lack of factual information about politics that matters, since none of the interaction terms involving factual information is significant (results not presented). The conclusion we draw from these findings is that the ratings provided by those who said they knew nothing about McDonough are meaningful, that they had an independent effect on their vote, but that these feelings appear

9. We have chosen the NDP as the reference group because we are interested in the impact of feelings toward the NDP leader.

10. As in table 3, the pattern does not seem to apply to the Liberal vote. Only two of the four coefficients are statistically significant, but there does seem to be a consistent pattern whereby those who feel uninformed about McDonough attach more importance to how they evaluate the NDP and less to how they rate her.

to have been more uncertain and tentative and to have had less weight in the vote choice.

Conclusion

Most people have feelings about leaders even if they say they know nothing about them. When asked how they feel about these leaders, people usually provide a rating, and most of the time these ratings are meaningful, in the sense that they have an independent effect on their vote. At the same time, those who indicate they know nothing about a leader appear to be less confident about their evaluations. As a consequence, they attach less weight to these evaluations and more to how they feel about the parties when deciding how to vote. The practical implication is that it is useful to tap respondents' subjective level of knowledge about the leaders, because leader evaluations tend to have a smaller impact on the vote among those who feel they know nothing about a leader.

These findings are consistent with the middle position taken by Zaller about nonopinion and nonattitudes. The data indicate that the responses provided by those who say they know nothing about a leader do not simply reflect random guessing. At the same time, a respondent who says she knows nothing about a leader conveys the message that her feelings toward that person are particularly tentative.

Appendix

Description of Variables

Variables have been recoded on a scale from 0 to 1, unless specified otherwise. The parentheses refer to the question number in the survey: "cps" refers to the campaign survey and "pes" to the postelection survey.

REGION

Atlantic includes New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland.

Prairies includes Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan.

EDUCATION LEVEL

The question was:

- What is the highest level of education that you have completed? (cpsm3)

High school dropout has a value of one when the highest level of education is less than completed high school.

University graduate has a value of one when the highest level of education is a B.A. or higher.

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GENERAL FACTUAL INFORMATION

General factual information is an index made up of four questions. The following questions have been used:

- Do you recall the name of the president of the United States? (cpsl6)
- Do you recall the name of the federal minister of finance? (cpsl11)
- Do you recall the name of the premier of [province]? (cpsl12)
- Do you recall the name of the first woman to be prime minister of Canada? (cpsl13)

The index is the sum of the four scores divided by four.

INTEREST IN POLITICS

The question was:

- On the (same) scale, where 0 means no interest at all and 10 means a great deal of interest, how would you rate your interest in politics generally? (cpsb5)

Interest in politics is a scale from 0 to 1, with the initial score divided by 10.

MEDIA EXPOSURE

Media exposure is an index made up of three questions. The following questions have been used:

- On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means no attention at all, and 10 means a great deal of attention, how much attention did you pay to news about the election campaign on TV? (pesb1)
- On the same scale from 0 to 10, how much attention did you pay to radio news about the election campaign? (pesb3)
- On the same scale from 0 to 10, how much attention did you pay to news about the election campaign in the newspaper? (pesb2)

The index is the sum of the three scores divided by 30.

VOTE

The following question has been used:

- Which party did you vote for: the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party, the New Democratic Party, the Reform Party, or another party? (pesa4)

LEADER RATINGS

The following questions have been used:

- How do you feel about Jean Charest (pesc1a) / Jean Chrétien (pesc1b) / Alexa McDonough (pesc1c) / Preston Manning (pesc1d) on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 means you really dislike him/her and 100 means you really like him/her?

PARTY RATINGS

The following questions have been used:

- How do you feel about federal Conservative Party (pesc2a) / federal Liberal Party (pesc2b) / federal New Democratic Party (pesc2c) / Reform Party (pesc2d) on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 means you really dislike it and 100 means you really like it?

PARTY IDENTIFICATION

The following questions have been used:

- In federal politics, do you usually think of yourself as a Liberal, Conservative, NDP, Reform, Bloc, or none of these? (cpsk1)
- How strongly [name of party] do you feel: very strongly, fairly strongly, or not very strongly? (cpsk2)

Four variables have been created, one for each party. Each variable takes the value of one if the respondent has a strong or a fairly strong identification with that party and zero otherwise.

UNINFORMED ABOUT LEADERS

The following questions have been used:

- Do you know a lot, a little, or nothing at all about Jean Chrétien? (pesdr1) / Jean Charest? (pesdr2) / Alexa McDonough? (pesdr3) / Preston Manning? (pesdr4)

Four variables have been created, one for each leader. Each variable takes the value of one if the respondent answers “nothing at all” or “I don’t know,” and zero otherwise. In table 1, the variable corresponds to the number of leaders about whom the respondent knows nothing at all, divided by four.

CYNICISM

Cynicism is an index made up of four questions. The following questions have been used:

- For each of the following statements, please tell me if you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree:
 - a) Those elected to parliament soon lose touch with people. (cpsb10a)
 - b) I don’t think the government cares much what people like me think. (cpsb10d)
 - c) Politicians are ready to lie to get elected. (cpsb10e)
- Do political parties keep their election promises most of the time, some of the time, or hardly ever? (cpsj13)

The index is the sum of the four scores divided by four.

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