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Is high self-esteem a path to the White House? The implicit theory of self-esteem and the willingness to vote for presidential candidates

Virgil Zeigler-Hill*, Erin M. Myers

Department of Psychology, University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5025, Hattiesburg, MS 39406, USA

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ABSTRACT

The implicit theory of self-esteem proposes that individuals with ostensibly higher levels of self-esteem will generally be viewed more positively than those with lower levels of self-esteem. The present studies examined whether the perceived self-esteem levels of the 2008 presidential candidates would influence the willingness of individuals to consider voting for these candidates. Across two studies, participants were generally more willing to consider voting for candidates who were perceived as possessing higher levels of self-esteem. The most interesting exception to this general pattern was that male democrats and female republicans were actually more willing to consider voting for Hillary Clinton when they believed she possessed lower levels of self-esteem. Results will be discussed in the context of the implicit theory of self-esteem.

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Do the personal attributes of candidates influence the willingness of potential voters to consider casting ballots in their favor on election day? In the past, it was often assumed that the personal attributes of candidates were not terribly important for most “rational” voters. Rather, candidates were believed to be judged almost exclusively in terms of their positions on the issues relevant to their campaigns (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960). Over the past few decades, however, a growing body of literature has shown that the personal attributes of candidates – ranging from their level of confidence (Bass, 1990) to the sounds of their names (Smith, 1998) – have an influence on the willingness of potential voters to consider voting for these individuals.

We believe that political candidates who are perceived as having higher levels of self-esteem will be viewed more positively than other candidates. This speculation is based on the implicit theory of self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill, submitted for publication) which proposes that individuals may assume that someone who appears to possess high self-esteem may also possess other desirable characteristics. In general, implicit theories refer to beliefs – operating largely outside conscious awareness – that concern the covariation of characteristics (see Uleman, Saribay, and Gonzalez (2008) for a review). For example, if an individual learns that a target possesses high (or low) self-esteem, then this may have an effect on how that individual is evaluated on dimensions such as competence or attractiveness. In support of the implicit theory of self-esteem, initial findings have shown that manipulating the ostensible self-esteem levels of targets has an influence on their

desirability as romantic partners (Zeigler-Hill, submitted for publication). Although these preliminary findings support the idea that individuals with ostensibly higher levels of self-esteem are generally viewed more positively than those with lower levels of self-esteem, it is important to note that individuals with ostensibly high levels of self-esteem are not always viewed this way. More specifically, men rated women with higher levels of self-esteem lower on warmth and trustworthiness than women with more moderate levels of self-esteem. The negative consequences faced by women with high self-esteem are thought to be a result of these women being seen as violating prescriptive norms of female modesty and niceness.

The present studies will examine whether the perceived self-esteem levels of the 2008 presidential candidates play a role in the willingness of individuals to consider voting for these candidates. We expect that individuals will generally be more likely to consider voting for candidates who appear to possess higher levels of self-esteem. It is also likely, of course, that the political affiliation of the individuals considering the candidates will play an important role in their evaluations. More specifically, we predict that the effects of perceived self-esteem will be the strongest for individuals who share the political affiliation of the candidate being considered (e.g., a republican participant considering a republican candidate).

The inclusion of a female candidate in the democratic primary contest allows for a unique opportunity to examine how the sex and political affiliation of each candidate may interact with their perceived self-esteem in predicting the likelihood that individuals will consider voting for these candidates. Considering the somewhat negative views of women with high self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill,

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 601 266 4596.
E-mail address: virgil@usm.edu (V. Zeigler-Hill).

submitted for publication), we predict that individuals will be less likely to consider voting for the female democratic candidate when she is believed to possess high self-esteem. That is, we expect the negative evaluations of women with high self-esteem to result in participants being less willing to consider voting for Clinton when it is believed that she possesses high self-esteem. To examine the role of perceived self-esteem on the willingness of participants to consider voting for presidential candidates, the present studies were conducted during the Fall semester of 2007 prior to the Iowa caucus. At the time the data were collected there were eight democratic candidates (i.e., Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, Chris Dodd, John Edwards, Mike Gravel, Dennis Kucinich, Barack Obama, and Bill Richardson) and ten republican candidates (i.e., Sam Brownback, Rudy Giuliani, Mike Huckabee, Duncan Hunter, John McCain, Ron Paul, Mitt Romney, Tom Tancredo, Fred Thompson, and Tommy Thompson).

1. Study 1

The purpose of study 1 was to examine whether participants were more likely to consider voting for candidates who were perceived as possessing higher levels of self-esteem. This was accomplished by asking participants to rate each candidate's perceived level of self-esteem and report their willingness to consider voting for each candidate.

1.1. Method

1.1.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 296 students (92 men and 204 women) enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses who participated in return for partial fulfillment of a research participation requirement. The data from 87 participants were excluded because these participants did not identify themselves as either a democrat or a republican.¹ The final sample consisted of 108 republicans (28 men and 80 women) and 101 democrats (35 men and 66 women). The mean age of participants was 19.95 years ($SD = 2.21$). Participants were asked to view a series of color head and shoulder full-face photographs of the presidential candidates presented in a random order. Each candidate's photograph was accompanied by his or her name, political affiliation, current position, and state of residence. Along with several other evaluations of each candidate that are not relevant to the present study (e.g., personality features), participants were asked to rate their perceptions of each candidate's level of self-esteem using a modified version of the Single-Item Self-Esteem Scale (SISE; Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001; "I see this person as someone who has high self-esteem") and report their willingness to consider voting for each candidate by rating their level of agreement with the following statement: "I would consider voting for this person in the 2008 presidential election."

1.2. Results and discussion

1.2.1. Data analytic strategy

The association between the perceived self-esteem levels of candidates and the willingness of participants to consider voting for these candidates was examined using hierarchical multiple regression analyses. The candidates were separated into three clusters based on their political affiliation and sex: the male democratic candidates, the female democratic candidate, and the

republican candidates. We believed that the association between perceived self-esteem and the willingness of participants to consider voting for candidates may be moderated by the political affiliation and sex of the participants, so these terms were included in the model. These regressions were set up hierarchically with the perceived self-esteem level of the candidates (centered for the purpose of testing interactions; Aiken & West, 1991), the political affiliation of the participants (0 = democrat, 1 = republican), and the sex of the participants (0 = female, 1 = male) entered as main effects on step 1. The two-way interactions of these main effects were entered on step 2 and the three-way interaction was entered on step 3.

1.2.2. Willingness to consider voting for the male democratic candidates

For the analysis concerning the willingness of participants to consider voting for the male democratic candidates, main effects emerged for perceived self-esteem ($\beta = .17, p < .01$), political affiliation ($\beta = -.59, p < .001$), and sex ($\beta = .15, p < .01$). These main effects were qualified by the two-way interactions of perceived self-esteem \times political affiliation ($\beta = -.37, p < .001$) and perceived self-esteem \times sex ($\beta = .18, p < .01$). In addition, the three-way interaction of perceived self-esteem \times political affiliation \times sex also emerged ($\beta = .25, p < .01$). The predicted values for this three-way interaction are shown in panel A of Fig. 1. Simple slopes tests found that the slopes of the lines representing the associations between the perceived self-esteem level of the male democratic candidates and the willingness of participants to consider voting for these candidates were positive for the male

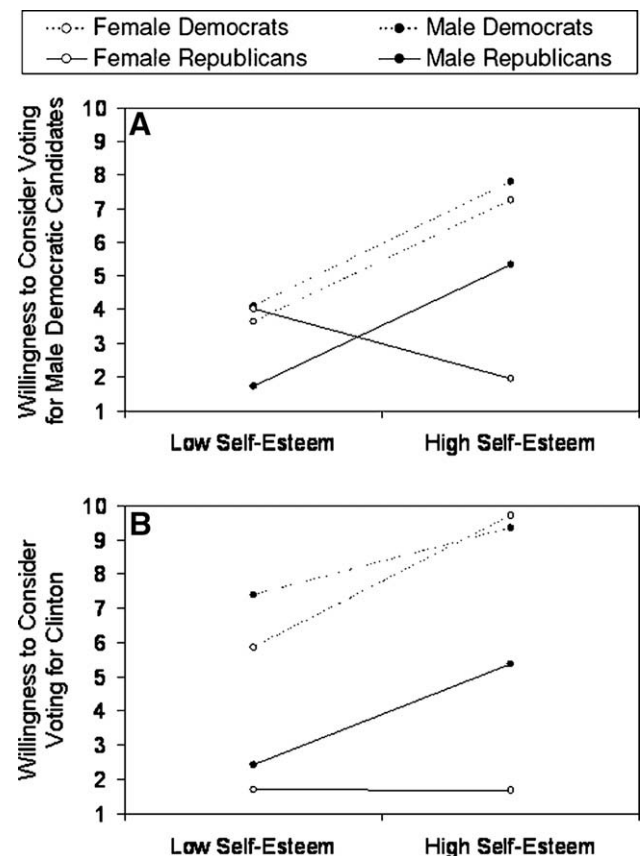


Fig. 1. Study 1: Predicted values for the male democratic candidates (panel A) and Clinton (panel B), illustrating the interactions of participant sex, participant political affiliation, and the perceived self-esteem level of the candidate (at values that are one standard deviation above and below its mean).

¹ The perceived self-esteem levels of the democratic candidates were not associated with the willingness of unaffiliated participants to consider voting for these candidates ($|β| < .08, ns$). For the republican candidates, higher levels of perceived self-esteem were associated with a greater willingness to consider voting for these candidates ($β = .28, p < .05$).

democratic participants ($\beta = .46, p < .001$), female democratic participants ($\beta = .43, p < .001$), and male republican participants ($\beta = .28, p < .05$). In contrast, the perceived self-esteem level of the male democratic candidates was negatively associated with the willingness of female republican participants to consider voting for them ($\beta = -.39, p < .001$). That is, female republican participants were actually less willing to consider voting for male democratic candidates when they believed these candidates possessed higher levels of self-esteem. Taken together, the results were largely consistent with the implicit theory of self-esteem such that most participants were generally more willing to consider voting for male democratic candidates when these candidates were thought to possess higher levels of self-esteem. The important exception to this pattern emerged among female republicans who were actually less willing to consider voting for male democratic candidates when they were perceived to have higher levels of self-esteem.

1.2.3. Willingness to consider voting for the female democratic candidate (Clinton)

Main effects emerged for perceived self-esteem ($\beta = .16, p < .01$), political affiliation ($\beta = -.79, p < .001$), and sex ($\beta = .14, p < .01$) in the analysis concerning the willingness of participants to consider voting for Clinton. These main effects were qualified by the two-way interaction of perceived self-esteem \times political affiliation ($\beta = -.36, p < .001$) and the three-way interaction of perceived self-esteem \times political affiliation \times sex ($\beta = .14, p < .01$). The predicted values for this three-way interaction are shown in panel B of Fig. 1. Consistent with the previous results for the male democratic candidates, simple slopes tests found that the slopes of the lines representing the associations between Clinton's perceived level of self-esteem and the willingness of participants to consider voting for her were positive for male democratic participants ($\beta = .32, p < .001$), female democratic participants ($\beta = .54, p < .001$), and male republican participants ($\beta = .30, p < .01$) even though male republican participants were less willing to consider voting for Clinton than either male or female democratic participants ($|\beta s| > .55, ps < .001$). For female republicans, however, the association between Clinton's perceived level of self-esteem and the willingness of participants to consider voting for her did not approach conventional levels of significance ($\beta = -.08, ns$) such that female republican participants were no more – or less – likely to consider voting for Clinton when she was believed to possess higher levels of self-esteem. It is interesting to note that female republican participants were actually significantly less willing than their male republican counterparts to consider voting for Clinton when she was believed to possess high levels of self-esteem ($\beta = .47, p < .01$). These results suggest that although participants were generally more willing to consider voting for Clinton when she was perceived to have higher levels of self-esteem, female republican participants were once again the exception because Clinton's level of self-esteem had no impact on their willingness to consider voting for her. That is, female republican participants were unwilling to consider voting for Clinton regardless of her perceived level of self-esteem.

1.2.4. Willingness to consider voting for the republican candidates

For the analysis concerning the willingness of participants to consider voting for male republican candidates, main effects emerged for perceived self-esteem ($\beta = .26, p < .001$), political affiliation ($\beta = .60, p < .001$), and sex ($\beta = -.20, p < .001$). The main effects of political affiliation and sex were qualified by their interaction ($\beta = -.27, p < .001$). Simple slopes tests found that sex was associated with the willingness to consider voting for republican candidates such that female republicans reported a greater willingness than male republicans ($\beta = -.40, p < .001$). The associa-

tion between sex and the willingness to consider voting for republican candidates did not approach conventional levels of significance among democratic participants ($\beta = -.03, ns$). These results show that the tendency for republican participants to consider voting for republican candidates is strongest among female republicans.

2. Study 2

The results of Section 1 were generally consistent with our predictions such that individuals were generally more willing to vote for candidates with ostensibly high levels of self-esteem. However, the correlational nature of this study precludes an understanding of the underlying causal process. To address this limitation, study 2 will manipulate the ostensible self-esteem levels of the candidates in order to determine whether participants express a greater willingness to consider voting for candidates when they are led to believe these candidates possess higher levels of self-esteem.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 416 students (119 men and 297 women) enrolled in undergraduate psychology courses who participated in return for partial fulfillment of a research participation requirement. The data from 123 participants were excluded because these participants did not identify themselves as either a democrat or a republican.² The final sample consisted of 150 republicans (56 men and 94 women) and 143 democrats (34 men and 109 women). The mean age of participants was 20.16 years ($SD = 3.72$). As in Section 1, participants were asked to view photographs of the presidential candidates. In the present study, however, these photographs were accompanied by self-esteem designations (i.e., low, moderate, or high self-esteem) that were ostensibly derived from "extensive linguistic analyses of speeches made by each of the candidates in order to determine the self-esteem level of each candidate." The self-esteem designations accompanying each photograph were actually randomly assigned to the targets. That is, some participants saw Biden's photograph with the label "low self-esteem" and other participants saw his photograph with the label "moderate self-esteem" or "high self-esteem." Participants were asked to rate their perceptions of each candidate's level of self-esteem and report their willingness to consider voting for each candidate using the same measures as Section 1.

2.2. Results and discussion

2.2.1. Willingness to consider voting for the male democratic candidates

The purpose of this analysis was to examine whether the ostensible self-esteem level of male democratic candidates would influence the willingness of participants to consider voting for these individuals. To address this issue, data from the present study were analyzed using a 3(self-esteem condition: low vs. moderate vs. high) \times 2(political affiliation: democrats vs. republicans) \times 2(sex: men vs. women) mixed-design analysis of variance (ANOVA) with

² Unaffiliated participants were more willing to consider voting for the male democratic candidates when they believed these candidates possessed high levels of self-esteem ($F[2, 120] = 6.36, p < .01$). For Clinton, the main effect of her ostensible level of self-esteem failed to reach conventional levels of significance ($F[2, 120] = 2.87, p < .07$). The marginal results for Clinton show that there was a trend for unaffiliated participants to be less willing to consider voting for her when they believed she possessed high levels of self-esteem compared with either low ($t = 1.83, p < .06$) or moderate levels ($t = 1.77, p < .06$). For the republican candidates, unaffiliated participants were more willing to consider voting for candidates as their ostensible levels of self-esteem increased, $F(2, 120) = 7.25, p < .001$.

self-esteem condition as a within-subjects factor. For this analysis, main effects emerged for self-esteem condition ($F[2, 580] = 28.35, p < .001$) and political affiliation ($F[1, 290] = 14.60, p < .001$). It is important to note that the main effect of self-esteem condition was qualified by the following interactions: self-esteem condition \times sex ($F[2, 580] = 5.73, p < .01$) and self-esteem condition \times political affiliation ($F[2, 580] = 7.08, p < .001$). The results of this analysis are displayed in Fig. 2. For the self-esteem condition \times sex interaction, post-hoc tests revealed that both men and women were more willing to consider voting for candidates in the high self-esteem condition than either the low ($ts > 2.10, ps < .05$) or moderate self-esteem conditions ($ts > 4.06, ps < .001$). However, it is important to note that women were more willing than men to consider voting for the male democratic candidates with high levels of self-esteem ($t = 3.90, p < .001$) but women were no more willing than men to consider voting for candidates with either low ($t = .58, ns$) or moderate levels of self-esteem ($t = 1.57, ns$).

For the self-esteem condition \times political affiliation interaction, post-hoc tests revealed that both democrats and republicans were more willing to consider voting for male democratic candidates in the high self-esteem condition than either the low ($ts > 3.12, ps < .01$) or moderate self-esteem conditions ($ts > 6.18, ps < .001$). Interestingly, the tendency of democratic participants to report a greater willingness than republican participants to consider voting for male democratic candidates with low ($t = 4.30, p < .001$) and moderate levels of self-esteem ($t = 2.14, p < .05$) failed to emerge for candidates thought to possess high levels of self-esteem

($t = 1.38, ns$). That is, republican participants were just as likely as democratic participants to consider voting for male democratic candidates with ostensibly high levels of self-esteem.

2.2.2. Willingness to consider voting for the female democratic candidate (Clinton)

The present analysis examined whether the willingness of participants to consider voting for Clinton depended on her ostensible level of self-esteem. For this analysis, main effects emerged for self-esteem condition ($F[2, 281] = 26.46, p < .01$) and political affiliation ($F[1, 281] = 459.54, p < .001$). These main effects were qualified by the three-way interaction of self-esteem condition \times political affiliation \times sex ($F[2, 281] = 5.27, p < .01$). The results of this analysis are presented in Fig. 3. Post-hoc tests revealed that self-esteem condition had no influence on the willingness of female democrats ($ts < .75, ns$) or male republicans ($ts < .30, ns$) to consider voting for Clinton. In contrast, Clinton's ostensible level of self-esteem had an effect on the willingness of both male democrats and female republicans to consider voting for her. For male democrats, their willingness to consider voting for Clinton was at its lowest level when she was thought to possess high levels of self-esteem ($ts > 2.29, ps < .05$). The willingness of female republicans to consider voting for Clinton was at its highest level when she was thought to possess low self-esteem and their willingness to consider voting for Clinton decreased significantly when she was thought to possess either moderate ($t = 2.79, p < .05$) or high levels of self-esteem ($t = 2.35, p < .05$). Taken together, these results suggest that Clinton's ostensible level of self-esteem only influenced the willingness of male democrats and female republicans to consider voting for her. It is important to note, however, that the results that emerged from this analysis suggest that being perceived as possessing high self-esteem actually decreased the willingness of some participants to consider voting for her.

2.2.3. Willingness to consider voting for the republican candidates

The purpose of this analysis was to examine whether the ostensible self-esteem levels of republican candidates would influence the willingness of participants to consider voting for these individuals. Main effects emerged for self-esteem condition ($F[2, 580] = 10.40, p < .001$) and political affiliation ($F[1, 290] = 8.08, p < .01$). The main effect of self-esteem condition was qualified by the following interactions: self-esteem condition \times sex ($F[2, 580] = 8.01, p < .01$) and self-esteem condition \times political affiliation ($F[2, 580] = 6.66, p < .001$). The results of this analysis are displayed in Fig. 4. For the self-esteem condition \times sex interaction, post-hoc tests revealed that women were more willing to consider voting

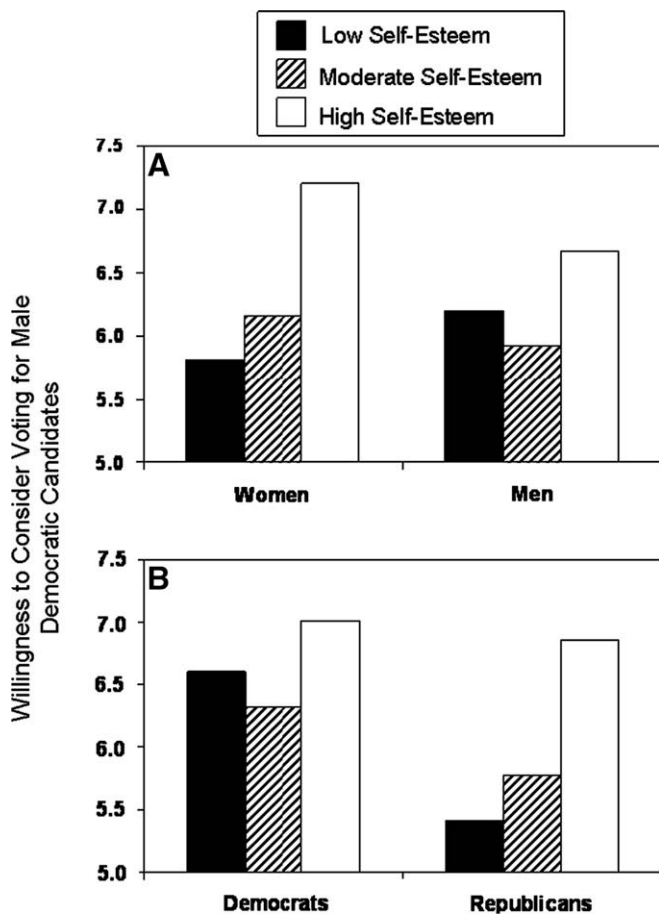


Fig. 2. Study 2: Self-esteem condition \times sex (panel A) and self-esteem condition \times political affiliation (panel B) predicting the willingness of participants to consider voting for the male democratic candidates.

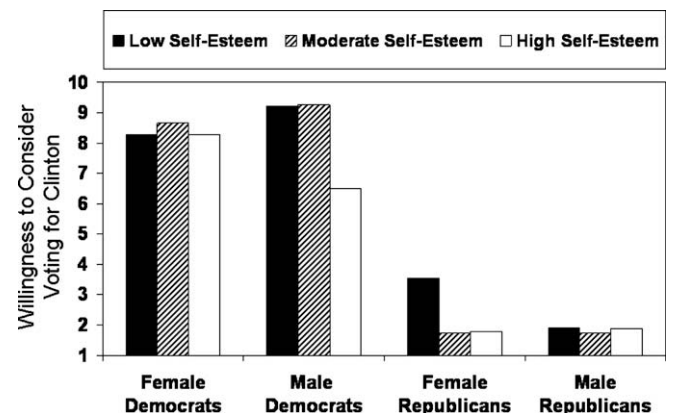


Fig. 3. Study 2: Self-esteem condition \times sex \times political affiliation predicting the willingness of participants to consider voting for Clinton.

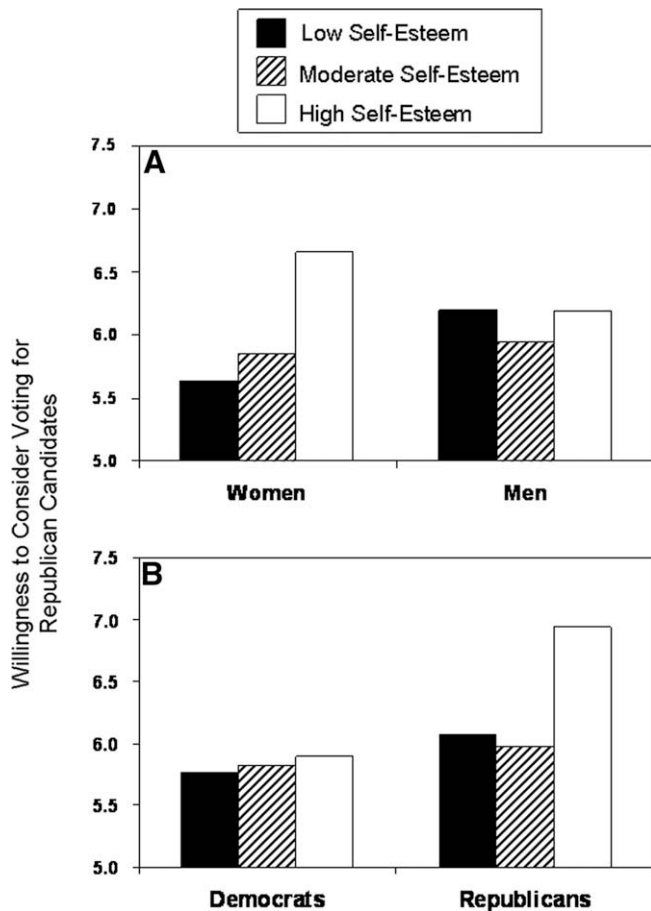


Fig. 4. Study 2: Self-esteem condition \times sex (panel A) and self-esteem condition \times political affiliation (panel B) predicting the willingness of participants to consider voting for republican candidates.

for republican candidates with ostensibly high levels of self-esteem than those with either low ($t = 6.20, p < .001$) or moderate levels of self-esteem ($t = 5.80, p < .001$). In contrast, the ostensible self-esteem levels of the republican candidates had no influence on the willingness of men to consider voting for these individuals ($ts < 1.89, ns$). These results suggest that the self-esteem levels of the republican candidates are more important to women than they are to men.

For the self-esteem condition \times political affiliation interaction, post-hoc tests revealed that the ostensible self-esteem levels of the republican candidates had no impact on the willingness of democratic participants to consider voting for these individuals ($ts < 1.98, ns$). Republican participants, in contrast, were more willing to consider voting for republican candidates when they believed the candidates possessed high levels of self-esteem than when the candidates were thought to possess either low ($t = 5.81, p < .001$) or moderate levels of self-esteem ($t = 7.08, p < .001$). It is important to note that republican participants were no more willing than democratic participants to consider voting for republican candidates when these candidates were believed to possess either low ($t = 1.94, ns$) or moderate levels of self-esteem ($t = 1.02, ns$). Rather, republican participants were only more willing than democratic participants to consider voting for republican candidates when these candidates were thought to possess high levels of self-esteem ($t = 4.53, p < .001$). That is, republican participants only showed a clear preference for candidates from their own party when these candidates were thought to possess high levels of self-esteem.

3. General discussion

The results of the present studies were generally consistent with the implicit theory of self-esteem (Zeigler-Hill, submitted for publication). That is, there was a tendency for individuals to be more willing to consider voting for candidates when they believed these candidates possessed higher levels of self-esteem. In Section 1, the perceived self-esteem level of the candidates was found to be associated with the willingness of participants to consider voting for these candidates. Not surprisingly, these analyses also showed that there was a strong tendency for participants to report a greater willingness to consider voting for candidates from their own political party. This tendency was the strongest for female republican participants for whom the perceived self-esteem of the democratic candidates was either negatively related (i.e., the male democratic candidates) or unrelated to their willingness to consider voting for these candidates (i.e., the female democratic candidate). In general, the association between the perceived self-esteem of the candidates and the willingness of participants to consider voting for them was somewhat stronger when the candidates and participants shared the same political affiliation. This may suggest that the personal attributes of candidates are most important when individuals are contemplating whether to vote for a candidate from their own party. It should be noted, however, that male republican participants were more likely to consider voting for democratic candidates when they were believed to possess higher levels of self-esteem.

In Section 2, similar results emerged such that participants generally expressed more willingness to vote for those candidates whom they believed to possess ostensibly higher levels of self-esteem. This was especially true for republican participants considering the male democratic candidates and the republican candidates. This suggests that perceived self-esteem may be a very important feature for those individuals because they were actually willing to consider voting across party lines for candidates believed to possess high levels of self-esteem. It is also important to note that women were more responsive than men to the ostensible self-esteem levels of male candidates. The preference that women show for men with high self-esteem was also found in Zeigler-Hill (submitted for publication) which showed that women rated men with high self-esteem as more desirable than men with low or moderate self-esteem.

The advantages associated with perceived high self-esteem did not always materialize for candidates. The most striking exception to this general pattern emerged for Clinton such that some participants were actually more willing to vote for her when they believed she possessed lower levels of self-esteem. These results are consistent with the findings of Zeigler-Hill (submitted for publication) which showed that women with high self-esteem were evaluated somewhat negatively on dimensions such as warmth and trustworthiness. One potential explanation for the reluctance of individuals to consider voting for Clinton when she was thought to have high self-esteem is that she may have been viewed as violating prescriptive norms concerning female modesty and niceness. This may be especially true if the meaning of high self-esteem is believed to be different for women than it is for men. For example, it is possible that women with high self-esteem are assumed to be at least somewhat narcissistic, whereas the same assumption may not be made for men with similar levels of self-esteem.

It is important to note several important limitations of the present studies. First, it is possible that these findings may reflect a regional "Red State" effect. It is unclear whether similar effects would emerge in other parts of the country that are less conservative than the southern region. Second, the exclusive use of college

students in the present studies may limit the extent to which the results of these studies may be generalized. For example, it is unclear whether more experienced voters would be as influenced by the ostensible self-esteem levels of candidates. That is, more experienced voters may be more concerned with specific issues rather than the personal characteristics of candidates. Third, other inferred traits may also play an important role in the decisions of voters. For example, previous research has found that inferences of competence based on facial appearance predicted the outcomes of various US congressional contests (Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, & Hall, 2005). Future research should examine whether inferred traits – such as competence – mediate the association between a candidate's perceived level of self-esteem and the willingness of individuals to consider voting for that candidate. Fourth, the measures of perceived self-esteem and willingness to consider voting for specific candidates consisted of a single-item. This limitation was offset to some degree by averaging these single-item measures across candidates.

In summary, the findings of the present studies provide initial evidence that the perceived self-esteem levels of presidential candidates may play a role in the willingness of potential voters to consider casting their ballots for these individuals. The present research does not question the importance of factors such as partisan identification, struggles over alternative policies, or the assessment of past performance in presidential elections (Campbell et al., 1960). Rather, the present studies merely emphasize that elections

are also a selection between candidates and that the inferred traits of these candidates – such as their self-esteem – may play a role in how individuals make their decisions on election day.

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