*Article*

# Choosing a Candidate: Traits, Issues, and Electability

Cynthia Peacock[1], Hannah Dugger[2],
J. Knox Fanelli[3], A. Jackson Harris[4],
J. Bert McLelland[4], and Lauren A. Richardson[4]

## Abstract

This research investigates the roles of issues, traits, and electability in the 2020 U.S. presidential nominating contest. These analyses utilize survey data gathered at political rallies in Iowa leading up to the caucuses and state and national news coverage. First, we identified the traits and issues respondents used to describe their support for a particular Democratic candidate over others. Next, we determined how issues, traits, and electability differed among the candidates. Finally, an analysis of news coverage uncovered how each candidate's electability was framed. We found supporters of moderate candidates were more likely to mention candidate traits as reasons for their support, whereas supporters of progressive candidates were more likely to mention issues. Despite the media focus on electability, respondents did not indicate that as a primary reason for supporting a candidate. State and national news coverage treated the electability of Democrats vying for the party nomination quite differently, depending on the candidate's gender and ideology.

## Keywords

Candidates, Iowa caucuses, issues, electability, traits

On April 8, 2020, Senator Bernie Sanders became the last Democrat to drop out of the primary race for president and Vice President Joe Biden completed his transition from a fourth-place finisher in the Iowa caucuses to the Democratic nominee. A variety of factors contributed to Biden's eventual success, but ultimately the decision belonged

[1]The University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, AL, USA
[2]The University of Alabama, Birmingham, AL, USA
[3]The University of Alabama in Huntsville, Huntsville, AL, USA
[4]The University of Alabama System, Tuscaloosa, AL, USA

**Corresponding Author:**
Cynthia Peacock, The University of Alabama, 901 University Boulevard, Tuscaloosa, AL 35401, USA.
Email: cpeacock@ua.edu

to the voters. Voters' candidate preferences are a result of attitudes, beliefs, and opinions about candidates in comparison with the others. When it comes down to describing why one candidate stands out among the others, traits and issues come to the fore. Traits, such as kindness, compassion, strength, and intelligence play into voters' preferences, as do policy positions and platforms issues like health care, foreign relations, and the economy. Both traits and issues contribute to a candidate's perceived electability, a concept that political analysts hone in on every election cycle. This work examines how voter preferences play out in terms of issues and traits and what that ultimately means for a candidate's electability.

## Looking at Iowa

In January or February every 4 years, Iowa joins the ranks of the nation's most influential democratic agents. Iowa's status of being first in the U.S. presidential election contest creates nationwide momentum among media, voters, and politicians. Every presidential primary season, anticipation for the Iowa caucuses swells to overwhelming proportions. Although the Iowa caucuses have been around since the 1840s, their relevance emerged when they jumped in front of the then-first New Hampshire primary in 1972. The caucuses increasingly have drawn the attention of the media, the public, and presidential candidates until it reached its modern form: a political spectacle that pulls out all the stops (PBS LearningMedia, 2020; Redlawsk et al., 2011).

   Despite the extravagant display of political engagement, Iowa is not the most accurate tool for predicting the next president, or nominee. A 2016 article described the prediction power of the Iowa caucuses this way:

> Since 1972, there have been nine Democratic and seven Republican contested caucuses. Only five of the Democratic caucus winners and three of the Republican caucus winners have gone on to win their party's nomination. With success rates of 55 and 43 percent respectively, it's clear the Iowa caucus isn't great at predicting presidential primary winners. (Hinckley, 2016)

   The success rate for Democrats fell even further when Pete Buttigieg, the delegate winner of the 2020 Iowa caucuses, dropped out before Super Tuesday (Politico, 2020). While the Iowa caucuses are a poor predictor of successful party nominees and general election winners, it is useful for thinning the field (Hinckley, 2016). The caucuses also create a unique environment to watch democracy in action, and retail politics is a major contributor to this environment. Retail politics is a campaign tactic through which candidates organize local events to personally interact with as many voters as possible, and Iowans notice. Since Iowa is first, candidates are able to practice their retail politics and have it broadcasted to the nation for weeks on end. A presidential race may seem distant to other states, but Iowa scales down the race to cultivate the atmosphere of a local election with a massive budget and lavish pomp (Crooked Media, 2019; Redlawsk et al., 2011). Iowans, through their unparalleled access to presidential candidates, play a critical role in revealing the candidates personality

traits and driving the nationwide conversation by fielding questions about the issues they prioritize.

Campaigning in Iowa is a complex dance with voters. Some candidates campaign in Iowa for over a year. According to the *Des Moines Register's* candidate tracker, candidates started campaigning in Iowa for the 2020 election as early as February 2018. Perhaps the most notorious courtship is the Iowa State Fair. Candidates can be found executing retail politics via speeches and gatherings at the fairgrounds, or engaging in common fair activities. Elizabeth Warren took selfies. Pete Buttigieg and John Delaney flipped pork on a grill with the Iowa Pork Queen. Bernie Sanders, Kamala Harris, and Amy Klobuchar sampled the famed fair cuisine (Lucas, 2019; PBS News Hour, 2019; Pezenik, 2019). The Iowa State Fair is an important launchpad for further campaign events that are closer to the caucus date. Most of these campaign events are rallies with high-energy productions that can boast high-profile guests: politicians, celebrities, and bands. It is common to spot media and political celebrities sprinkled among the political tourists and Iowans. For one weekend, the attendees are an audience eagerly watching candidates put on their best show. It was at these rallies that the survey data for this research was gathered.

So why study the Iowa caucus? The simple answer: voters. In spite of Iowa caucuses' low voter turnout and its lack of diversity, they act as a spectator sport for the politically engaged. Events from major media outlets are scattered across the state, universities send research teams to observe, and some precincts on caucus night hold more observers than caucus goers. Data collected are unique and have the potential to reflect the attitudes of an engaged electorate. Iowans pride themselves on doing the work of the nation in terms of parsing out the issue positions of the candidates as well as putting their individual traits on display. This study examines how those attending political rallies and events in the days leading up to the Iowa caucuses made their decision about which candidate to support. Specifically, we examine the nature of issues, traits, and electability when it comes to candidate support.

## Traits, Issues, and Electability

Candidates are evaluated on their issue positions as well as their unique individual traits. Voters determine a candidate's policy and issue positions through campaign literature, websites, talking points, debate performances, and media coverage of the candidate and party affiliation (Conover & Feldman, 1982, 1989). Voters also evaluate candidates on identity and perceived character traits such as leadership, competency, integrity, and likability or charisma (Holian & Prysby, 2014). Perceptions of issues and traits, however, are hardly exclusive. Voters may make inferences about character traits based on the issue and policy positions with which a candidate aligns (Hayes, 2005).

The links between candidates' signature issues and a candidates' character traits are not interpreted the same way by every voter; the moral foundations of voters can play a role in the interpretation of information about candidates (Clifford, 2014). For some voters, concentrating on character traits is easier than dissecting the complicated issues

of national and international politics. The focus on character traits over policy considerations does not seem to be different based on political sophistication, even if it might be a common misperception that more sophisticated voters focus "only on the issues" (Pierce, 1993).

Both issues (Petrocik, 1996) and traits (Hayes, 2005) have long been associated with particular political parties. This can be seen in *party reputation*, which refers to the likelihood of voters associating a particular issue or trait with one party more t0han the other, or in *candidate stereotyping* which entails applying a particular party stereotype to a candidate (Goggin & Theodoridis, 2017). Republicans tend to have trait ownership over *leadership* and *morality* while Democrats more closely align with *honesty* and *compassion*. When it comes to issues, Republicans are more highly regarded on national defense and crime, while Democrats outpace Republicans on the environment and health care (Goggin & Theodoridis, 2017). While between party comparisons are many, little work has established the differences that may occur within the parties. In this study, we examine the differences among Democratic candidates in terms of the traits and issues voters mention when describing their support. Specifically, we determine whether traits or issues figure more prominently in support for progressive versus moderate candidates.

Various traits and policy positions have long had a relationship with electability. Historically, ideologically moderate candidates have fared better than more extreme candidates have, although there is some evidence to suggest this is changing (Utych, 2020). Voters perceive candidates to be more electable if they run on more moderate platforms, but they see candidate traits as a stronger predictor (Stone & Rapoport, 1994). Traits, such as a winning record within the primary and charisma when performing on TV, are among the strongest factors predicting voters' perception of a candidate's electability (Stone & Rapoport, 1994).

Voters evaluate candidates based on traits and issues, but also consider their ability to win the general election, the "electability" criterion (Abramowitz, 1989; Aldrich, 1980; Bartels, 1988). If a strong primary candidate looks weak in the general, voters face a difficult choice between a candidate who is perceived as electable and their preferred candidate (Simas, 2017). A Monmouth University Poll (2019) released before the 2020 Iowa caucuses showed Democrats wanted a candidate to beat Donald Trump, regardless of complete agreeance on issues. In prenomination campaigns, candidates place great importance on the idea of electability. In *Before the Convention*, John Aldrich (1980) discusses this concept.

> Winning primaries provides prima facie evidence that the candidate will be able to generate votes in the fall, and this evidence should help convince the party's members that, even if they must give a little on policy, they should support the candidate's nomination. (p. 84)

The sequential election process creates momentum that propels candidates toward the party nomination, which means early victories equal more momentum, which yields electability (Bartels, 1988). Results from smaller and earlier contests, like Iowa

and New Hampshire, set the stage for momentum to carry through to other primaries (Butler, 2009). This momentum, coupled with perceived abilities to win in the general election, contributes to conceptions of candidate electability. Voters base their support for a candidate on issue stances, personal traits, and electability, or the momentum gained through primary victories (Abramowitz, 1989). To illuminate how issues, traits, and electability functioned among the democratic primary contestants, we pose two research questions.

> **Research Question 1:** How do political rally-goers describe their support for candidates in terms of issues, traits, and electability?
> **Research Question 2:** Do support statements favoring progressive candidates differ from those favoring moderate candidates?

## News Framing Electability

The media play an important role in framing voters' perceptions of candidates, particularly when it comes to the question of electability (Eberl et al., 2017). Framing refers to the media's use of certain specific elements of "a perceived reality" in a way that promotes a certain conclusion or interpretation (Entman, 1993). Media frames influence how audiences perceive the topics presented. In their 2016 study, Jones et al. (2016) analyzed the ways in which media framing of the 2012 Iowa caucuses impacted, how viewers felt about the electability of the reported frontrunner, Mitt Romney. They found that participants' perceptions of Romney were significantly influenced by the programs they viewed. This demonstrates the impact media framing has on the general public, particularly in terms of how the framing of political candidates' personality traits and policies influence perceptions of their electability.

Closely related to framing is the concept of attribute or second-level agenda setting. Like framing, attribute agenda setting in elections involves a transfer of salience from candidates or the media to the minds of the public (Heim, 2013). Specifically, attribute agenda setting concerns the properties or traits of candidates, which come to define their image in the minds of the electorate (Heim, 2013, p. 501). Unlike issue-based agenda setting, which is largely a cognitive process for voters, attribute agenda setting also has an affective element. It influences how voters *feel* (on an emotional or "gut" level) about candidates, as well as what they know about them (Golan et al., 2007). Media narratives surrounding candidate attributes and public perception thereof relate to whether a candidate is perceived as competent or bumbling, charismatic or boring, electable or unelectable (Golan et al., 2007; Heim, 2013).

Candidates also can play a more direct role in attribute agenda setting. In a study of the 2008 Democratic Iowa caucuses, Heim (2013) found candidates routinely attempted to influence media narratives through press releases. In that primary, each of the three candidates' attempts at attribute agenda setting focused on a different trait, with Hillary Clinton focusing on experience, Barack Obama on change versus the status quo, and John Edwards on being a fighter versus being a coward. Findings indicated that this worked for some, but not all of the candidates. An analysis of agenda

setting in the 2004 election found that while campaigns' efforts at agenda setting through TV ads were relatively ineffective when it came to issue agenda setting, the Kerry campaign's attempt at affective attribute agenda setting through negative ads paid distinct dividends in public opinion polling (Golan et al., 2007). Media may at times privilege the attribute agenda setting narratives of some campaigns and neglect others, something that could affect voter perception of candidates.

During the 2020 primary, electability emerged as a primary focus in news coverage and was touted as perhaps the most important factor in choosing a Democratic candidate to face President Trump. Seitz-Wald (2019) described electability as "the most important, least understood word in the 2020 race." The article went on to detail the self-perpetuating nature of electability in that it is driven by national media coverage. A candidate is described (by elites, campaigns, polls, etc.) as electable, voters tell pollsters that they support a particular candidate because they are electable, the media then reports on those polls and the cycle continues. To accompany our investigation of issues, traits, and electability, we investigate the ways in which state and national news cover the candidates' electability. We pose two research questions:

> **Research Question 3:** How does news coverage construct candidates' electability surrounding the Iowa caucuses?
> **Research Question 4:** Does media coverage of electability differ among the candidates?

This study incorporates two distinct data sets. In Study 1, we analyzed survey responses from political rally-goers in Iowa leading up to the caucuses to determine how issues, traits, and electability related to each candidate's support. Second, we analyzed state and national news coverage in the weeks around the Iowa caucuses to understand how the news covered candidates' electability.

## Study 1

### Method

*Participants and Procedures.* Researchers from three universities traveled to Iowa to collect survey responses from people attending candidate rallies and campaign events leading up to the Iowa caucuses. The research teams collected survey responses at a total of eight candidate rallies for Elizabeth Warren (2), Andrew Yang (1), Pete Buttigieg (1), Joe Biden (2), Bernie Sanders (1), and Amy Klobuchar (1) in Cedar Rapids, Indianola, and Des Moines, Iowa on February 1st and 2nd, 2020. Respondents who agreed to participate in the study answered a series of questions including items gauging their opinions about the candidates competing in the Iowa caucuses. Respondents were given the option of completing a paper questionnaire or a virtual questionnaire on Qualtrics via QR code.

A total of 265 respondents started the survey. Rally attendees were asked which candidate competing in the Iowa caucuses they supported and then given a text field to describe why they support that candidate (the primary variable in this study). The

open-ended question was answered by 119 people. Participants aged from 18 to 74 years ($M = 37.94$, $SD = 17.71$). Of those who responded, 57.1% were women; 83.3% were White, and 7.1% were of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin.

*Measures.* *Support statements* were the responses participants provided to the open-ended question "Why do you support your candidate for president?" Each text response was coded for whether it included personal traits, issue positions, mentions of electability, all of these, none of these, or any combination. Two coders independently assessed 20% of the data and achieved intercoder reliability. The names of the candidates and all other parts of the survey were absent at the time of coding to avoid interference.

  *Issues* included specific legislation, issues stances, and references to plans, platforms, policies, and positions. Some examples of the terms and phrases included within the issue category are any reference to specific issues positions such as health care or immigration, and phrases such as "has plans for," "platform," and/or "solution to" (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .84$).

  *Traits* included descriptions of the candidates' character, identity features, and individual persona. Examples of traits mentioned in the data include, "intellect," "wisdom," and specific mentions of the candidate's race or gender (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .1$).

  *Electability* included mentions of a candidate's likelihood of being elected to public office. The following are examples of electability from the data, "beating Trump," "highest chance of winning," and "electable" (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .1$).

  As indicated by their policy platforms and news coverage, Sanders and Warren were categorized as progressive, while Biden, Buttigieg, and Klobuchar were categorized as moderate.

## Results

The first two research questions asked how political rally-goers describe their support for candidates in terms of issue positions, personal traits, and electability (Research Question 1) and whether that differed depending on the moderate or progressive nature of the candidate (Research Question 2). We first report the statistics associated with these questions and follow with a qualitative description of the responses and how they differed among the candidates.

  Of the 119 open-ended responses analyzed, 34.5% mentioned traits, 24.4% mentioned issues, 22.7% mentioned both issues and traits, and 18.5% did not mention either. Moderate and progressive candidates support statements differed significantly in mentions of traits $\chi^2 (1, N = 100) = 5.30$, $p < .05$ and issues $\chi^2 (1, N = 100) = 11.57$, $p < .001$. Moderate candidates (72.7%) were more likely than progressive candidates (50.7%) to have their support described in terms of traits. Those supporting progressive candidates (66.1%) were more likely than those supporting moderate candidates (31.8%) to describe their support in terms of issues. Only 10% of respondents explicitly referred to electability when describing their support for candidates. Support statements for moderate candidates (20.5%) were more likely to refer to electability than those for progressive candidates (1.8%), $\chi^2 (1, N = 100) = 9.54$, $p < .05$.

When respondents mentioned traits, they generally referenced candidates who were more moderate than the rest. In fact, many respondents mentioned "moderate" explicitly in describing reasons for supporting these candidates. It is important to note that we did not include terms like "moderate" and "progressive" in the trait category because of the various ways these terms can be used to describe individuals' traits, their issue positions, and their likelihood of electability. Mayor Pete Buttigieg benefited from supporters' impressions that he was generally a "good guy." This conception of him is evident in phrasing such as "great personality," "he listens and tries to understand," and he is "intelligent and he cares." Joe Biden was repeatedly characterized as having "experience and leadership." Bernie Sanders' support was described in terms of consistency over time and trustworthiness. Elizabeth Warren was often referred to as being intelligent, and her higher education connection was cited by several respondents. Likewise, Andrew Yang was often described as being a "smart" candidate, a "forward thinker" and as "the only person really looking to the future."

When respondents mentioned issues, they generally were referencing progressive candidates. Support statements for Sanders and Warren resembled a laundry list of policy proposals including criminal justice reform, trade policy, and student debt. Supporters of the progressive candidates were so well-versed in their candidate's platforms and talking points, that some of the survey responses even included policy shorthand such as UBI (Universal Basic Income) and M4A (Medicare for All). Support statements for Elizabeth Warren were marked by mentions of plans and policies such as "I believe in her and her plans." As with traits, Andrew Yang's policies and issue stances were described as being pointed toward the future, including "future focused solutions."

Although mentions of electability were relatively few throughout, they were uniform in their wording and oftentimes explicitly used the word "electability" in their response. Other references included phrasing such as "highest chance of winning in the general election." Moderate candidates were the primary beneficiaries of electability mentions within the support statements we collected from precaucus rally attendees.

Nevertheless, "electability" seemed to be the term *du jour* when it came to candidate coverage. Because voters' perceptions tend to be shaped by media coverage (Eberl et al., 2017), Study 2 sought to better understand the ways that the news media was constructing ideas about the Democratic candidates and their electability.

## Study 2

### Method

Next, we analyzed the portrayal of candidates and their electability in three online newspapers. Study 2 focused on how news media covered candidates' electability (Research Question 3), and whether that coverage differed among the candidates (Research Question 4). ProQuest was searched for each candidate's name and the terms "electability" and "electable." Results were filtered to include news stories and

exclude op-eds and opinion pieces. Articles were drawn from *The New York Times, The Washington Post*, and *The Des Moines Register* from January 26th through February 2nd, 2020 (*n* = 14) and February 4th to February 11th, 2020 (*n* = 10): the week before and after caucus day. Most of the articles mentioned multiple candidates rather than focusing on one. After compiling articles, we searched within the document for the words "electable" and "electability" and analyzed the sentence in which the highlighted word appeared and the paragraph(s) or surrounding sentences for context. We first determined the candidate or candidates each instance of "electability" was in reference to, followed by any specific traits or policies of the candidate(s) that were mentioned. After reviewing each instance of "electability" in every article, we used an inductive thematic analysis and determined four themes that encompassed how the candidates were covered by the news in terms of electability.

## Results

We found descriptions of candidate electability fell into four broad themes: *Beating Trump*, *Gender Trouble*, *Performance Factor*, and *Candidate Appeal*.

*Beating Trump.* Winning in the general election against President Trump was central to coverage about electability. Outperforming Trump in the general election in November and having the competence and energy to present as a worthy opponent on the Presidential debate stage all worked to define what made a candidate electable. Many articles emphasized electing a Democratic president and beating Trump was one of the most important concerns for voters this year, more than any of the policies or issues being pushed by candidates.

The *Washington Post* accurately set the precedence for anticipation of the 2020 Iowa caucus an article titled "Democratic Candidates Make Final Iowa Push" published on February 2, 2020. Journalists Matt Viser and Dan Balz wrote, "While the party over the past three years has struggled to answer a basic question 'How do you beat Trump?' the results here will offer the first moment of clarity."

With this speculation, the *Post* could be suggesting that beating Trump is on the forefront of many voters' minds. Then-candidate Joe Biden knew it, too. In the same article, Viser and Balz used Biden's statement in a recent debate to make his case to voters. "Joe Biden used his closing argument to present himself as the safest choice for voters worried most about finding a nominee who can defeat President Trump."

The *Post* echoed sentiment from a January 27 article from The *New York Times* in which Maggie Astor wrote about a town hall televised by Fox News, "As always, the undertone—and sometimes the overtone—was each candidate's so-called electability against President Trump." Electability was synonymous with beating President Trump. This was not the only instance where the two were mentioned in the same concept. On February 2, 2020, the *Des Moines Register* asked, "What does electability look like?" The answer stemmed from Joe Biden.

"Biden has stressed his own electability from the earliest days of the campaign, arguing he is best suited to take on Republican President Donald Trump in a general election because he can win over independents and disaffected Republicans." Of course, Biden is not the only candidate that is covered by the media stressing they can beat Trump and the electability that correlates with that.

On the same day, an article from *The New York Times* focused on the quick instance of heat between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders that included a claim from Clinton about Sanders' likeability and Democratic Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib booing Clinton at a Sanders campaign event during caucus weekend. The article amplified Sanders,

> "focusing instead on making the case for his own electability against Mr. Trump. . . . At a stop in Indianola, he presented his most forceful argument yet, saying would beat Mr. Trump because he would excite voters, speak to the working class and expose Mr. Trump's populist 'hypocrisy.'"

The media coverage seemed hyperfocused on the relationship between electability and beating Trump, mainly at the behest of candidate talking points and sound clips. Mentions of then-candidate and now-nominee Joe Biden appeared more times than any other candidate when the subject of beating Trump was covered. It is worth pondering if the saturated mentions of Joe Biden beating Trump was a factor in his eventual nomination, especially given Biden's poor performance in the Iowa caucuses.

*Gender Trouble.* Several articles discussed electability within the context of the challenge to electability posed by being a woman. Each instance of electability that mentioned gender questioned the ability of women to win elections. In fact, a piece from *The New York Times* written after the caucus, on February 8th, credited part of Buttigieg's win to his electability, and noted how this may work against women in the race: "Mr. Buttigieg has been aided by the concept of electability, which has hung over the primary season and can disadvantage women running for office in particular."

Some discussion about the relationship between gender and electability stemmed from the debate stage where the topic of women winning the White House lingered around Warren and Klobuchar. Again from *The New York Times* on February 9th,

> "That argument—winning in every place, every time—is one that both Ms. Warren and Ms. Klobuchar have made, emphasizing and elevating each other's electoral successes on the debate stage. Often, this was explicitly or implicitly in response to the subject of electability and whether a woman could win the White House, which came up frequently with the historically large number of women in the 2020 field."

Based on the coverage, Klobuchar and Warren were frequently left defending their ability to get elected because of their gender. During an election year in which several women vied for the nomination, it is expected that media coverage would address the historical significance. However, it is important to note that Biden's and Sanders's electability was constructed with their ability to beat President Trump,

while Klobuchar's and Warren's electability was covered in a way that tried to convince voters they can do something as fundamental as receiving votes.

When Warren and Ashley Judd campaigned together before the caucuses, *The New York Times* reported, "Ms. Judd brings feminist bona fides, and seemed well positioned to answer the 'electability" question, or at least urge people to believe that Elizabeth Warren could win—with their votes." The reporting seemed to imply Judd was urging people to believe Elizabeth Warren could win, with the implied contradiction being Warren's chances of winning were slim.

*Performance Factor.* Electability in news coverage also was justified by candidates' contest performances. In describing candidates' electability, several articles mentioned a proven winning record, speculation of primary victories, and moving forward in the polls. *The New York Times* speculated Warren's rise in caucus polls gave her an excuse to not talk about electability. In terms of winning records and its relationship with electability, postcaucus coverage questioned former Vice President Biden's ability to win an election. Before caucus night, coverage speculated that Biden's potential poor performance would shape voters' definition of electability. In the event, Biden underperformed in Iowa. This was the hot topic of postcaucus coverage, as several discussions of Biden's electability highlighted his unexpected underperformance. *The Washington Post* noted Biden's risky electability claims translated into a reality because of his poor primary performance.

Of course, coverage of electability's relationship with winning records would feel incomplete without mention of Klobuchar's previous electoral success. Buttigieg, the official winner of the Iowa caucuses, makes a point to correlate electability with his predicted and eventual performance. He regularly self-proclaimed that electability means "to do well in an election," and news coverage latched on to his talking points.

*Candidate Appeal.* A candidate's ability to carry or *turn out* enough voters on Election Day to win the presidency was a central theme of electability. This coverage focused on the affinity and rapport candidates can build among voters, encompassing references to winning coalitions, excitement/energy, broad appeal, endorsements, party unity, and even race. Race falls into this category because, unlike gender, it was never discussed in terms of whether a candidate's race was an asset or a liability, but rather in terms of a candidate's ability to win votes from different racial groups. An instance of this, and of the coverage of Pete Buttigieg's candidate appeal, comes from the *Des Moines Register*, "As national polls continue to show Buttigieg receiving little support among African American voters, he's getting more questions in front of Iowa audiences about his electability."

In almost every case, comments about each candidate's appeal fell into a neat storyline. Though Buttigieg tried to make positive arguments about his own appeal, remarks from journalists and quoted sources were nearly all about his weakness among Black voters. Discussions of Joe Biden's appeal were about his ability to build a winning coalition of Black voters and working class, postindustrial whites. *The New York Times* quoted a source claiming that Biden, " . . . has the unique ability to both assemble a

diverse coalition, and to compete in the industrial Midwest." Amy Klobuchar's rare number of mentions always discussed her potentially broad appeal. Her supporters arguing her record of "doing good in red, purple, and blue counties in Minnesota" made her electable. Bernie Sanders garnered more coverage, mostly in the context of describing his campaign as one that could generate excitement/enthusiasm, which would encourage record turnout. There were only two references to Warren, both of which mentioned her campaign was pitching her as the candidate of party unity.

Interestingly, and beyond the themes discussed in the Study 2 results, a dichotomy appeared to exist between *electability* and substantive matters such as ideas, policy, or ideology. For example, *The New York Times* wrote, " . . . a Democratic race that began as a contest of ideas and ideology has given way to a fixation on electability." This dichotomy was reinforced with a remark that Elizabeth Warren was " . . . seeking to motivate voters around ideals rather than the vague concept of electability." This analysis found that news coverage of electability generally falls into one for four categories: winning in the general election, the costs of being a woman candidate, previous contest performance, and ability to turn out voters on Election Day.

## Discussion

The year 2020 packed some punch in terms of politics: the Iowa caucuses experienced a historic fiasco, Joe Biden was nominated via a virtual convention due to an international pandemic, and Senator Kamala Harris became the first Black woman to be nominated as vice president. Since the caucuses are held so early in the year, it is easy to forget the buzz and impact generated by one of the most anticipated political events of the presidential election cycle. As previously discussed, the caucuses are not the best predictor of winners (Hinckley, 2016). Mayor Buttigieg secured the most delegates from the contest, and he dropped out of the race less than a month later (Politico, 2020). Nonetheless, data from those attending political rallies leading up to the caucuses, as well as the news coverage of the candidates' electability yielded interesting and important findings.

Our findings make three concrete contributions to research surrounding candidate support and coverage. First, we find that supporters of progressive and moderate candidates differ in the ways they adopt traits and issues as reasons to support a candidate. Next, although news media covered electability as a critical deciding factor for voters as they determined which candidate to support, this did not play out in the support statements we analyzed. Finally, these analyses indicate important overlap and divergence from the two studies. Whereas being a moderate candidate was related to electability in both studies, the treatment of gender differed among the two.

More of the precaucus rally attendees surveyed mentioned traits of a candidate in describing their support than issues. Support for progressive candidates was more likely to include mentions of their issue positions, whereas support for moderate candidates was more likely to be described with personal traits. If the 2020 Iowa caucus were a referendum on who caucus goers found most electable, then it appears that trait-forward candidates were found more electable than issue-forward candidates.

The responses we gathered from respondents supporting moderate candidates were marked by mentions of traits, but there were also explicit mentions of electability. Our study supports Aldrich's (1980) claim that moderate voters do consider the prospect of success in the general when making their primary election choice. To this work, our study adds the nature of individual characteristics, rather than policy positions, to go hand-in-hand with moderate support and electability. Support for progressive candidates was less likely to be described by traits and more often referenced policy positions. That Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders centered their platform and talking points on "plans" or policy proposals, might have been to their detriment in the 2020 Iowa caucus cycle. It is not surprising that Sanders and Warren, two experienced legislators, chose to make policy the focal point of their respective campaigns. Joe Biden had a long tenure in Congress before serving as vice president, but his supporters were more likely to reference his electability and ability to "get things done" rather specific policy ideas. Respondents in our study somewhat foreshadowed the eventual nomination of a moderate, trait-forward candidate. While progressive candidates showed potential viability, primary voters across the country rallied around a candidate who our respondents identified more with traits and electability than issues, Joe Biden.

After examining candidate support statement, we turned to media coverage of electability. We found electability in the news to fall into four themes: defeating President Trump, the costs of being a woman running for president, previous election performance, and the candidate's appeal to voters. This study, like past studies, found evidence of successful efforts by candidates to frame media discourse around voter appeal (Golan et al, 2007; Heim, 2013). Unlike Heim's (2013) analysis of media framing in the 2008 Iowa caucuses, we did not find evidence that media coverage accepted one candidate's narrative to the exclusion of all others. Some candidates were privileged, while others were not, but most candidates running got a chance to make their case on voter appeal.

Beating Trump emerged as the most common theme within the coverage. Often used as a broad definition for electability, winning in the general election was framed as the single most important element for Democratic voters. Nearly every candidate mentioned in the coverage was measured by their perceived ability to unseat the incumbent President. Some coverage even argued that a candidate's ability to defeat Trump in the general election was more important to voters than any policy proposals or plans for a White House tenure. This was not supported by results from Study 1 in which so few respondents mentioned electability compared with mentions of issues or traits. Whereas survey results indicate that electability is a bonus to appealing traits and issue stances, news media covered electability as the dominant issue. This raises questions about the spiraling influence of voters, polls, and media coverage when electability is assessed.

Performance in the polls and past records of success also were central to coverage of candidate electability. Amy Klobuchar's talking point about winning every election since elementary school did not seem to resonate with voters. Pete Buttigieg, who won a single election to be mayor of South Bend, Indiana, fared extremely well. While sparkling election track records may translate into future election success in

democratic contests, this was not the case in the 2020 Iowa caucus. After the caucus, Biden dominated performance coverage due to his unprecedented poor performance on caucus night. The news asked, if Biden cannot gather victories in the primary, is he electable? The Iowa caucuses have not historically proven to be great predictors of eventual nomination or general election success. After Biden's much-anticipated win in South Carolina, and a successful sweep of delegates afterward, and an eventual party nomination, Iowa became no more than a speed bump on his road to the general election.

Although the media coverage analyzed in the study questioned Biden's electability after the caucuses, it recognized his ability to appeal to diverse groups of voters. The ability to appeal to and turn out voters was widespread in the news coverage. Biden was portrayed as having strong voter appeal because of his strength with Black voters. Sanders was covered as having strong voter appeal because his campaign generated excitement and energy. Klobuchar, who boasted neither strong poll numbers nor great enthusiasm, fell back on her record of victories in red and purple counties to show that she had strong voter appeal. Nearly every reference to Pete Buttigieg's voter appeal highlighted a weakness: inability to garner support from Black voters.

Media coverage of gender and electability was tinted with a derogatory tone, and often questioned women candidates' ability to turn their campaigns into a nomination. Electability coverage in the news for Klobuchar and Warren many times revolved around the disadvantage being a woman posed when facing a competition. The coverage we analyzed did not refer to the women candidates' looks, clothing, home life, or motherly demeanor. Absent were sexist comments such as "a den mother with a cheerleader's smile," which a reporter at the *Chicago Tribune* used to describe Senator Carol Moseley-Braun, who vied for the 2004 Democratic nomination for president (Sanbonmatsu, 2017).

While the articles did not include blatantly sexist comments, the fact that gender emerged as a theme in electability coverage can be interpreted in a few ways. From one perspective, being a woman presidential candidate does deserve coverage. Women have fought, and are still fighting, for rights and equality in country where men dominate leadership roles. When women run for president, of course media will cover the event. From another perspective, it is worth noting that when gender factors into electability coverage, it does so to the detriment of women candidates. The coverage analyzed here indicates that being a woman alone indicates a challenge to one's electability. Although a woman has not been elected president yet in the United States, women candidates are just as electable as their male counterparts (Paxton & Hughes, 2017). Data from Rutgers University Center for American Women and Politics shows more women hold statewide office now than ever before. A record number of women were inaugurated into the 116th U.S. Congress. The first woman Speaker of the House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, is second in line of presidential succession (Rutgers University, 2020). Senator Kamala Harris will be vice president if Vice President Joe Biden wins the general election in November 2020.

As noted, gender did not emerge as a primary focus for rally-goers. And when it was mentioned, being a women candidate was an advantage. One respondent expressed

support for Elizabeth Warren because she was not a man. Another respondent supported Andrew Yang because he is an ally to women. Although respondents did not view being a woman as a detriment to electability, it was a factor among the coverage analyzed in this study. The disparity between the two should be of interest to communication scholars. If news media adopt a challenge frame in their coverage of electability for women candidates, then voters may form the same perception. That our respondents did not reflect that frame could be an argument in favor of the Iowa caucuses and the political environment it creates. If voters across the country were exposed to candidates the way Iowans were, perhaps news media would reflect the respondents' orientation to women candidates rather than adopting the gender as a challenge frame in their coverage of electability.

Events played out to mirror the sentiment of the survey respondents. On March 15, 2020, eventual Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden assured America that he would choose a woman to be his running mate if nominated for president (Stevens, 2020). He did deliver on his promise, and on August 11, 2020, Senator Kamala Harris was named as Joe Biden's pick for vice president of the United States (Burns & Glueck, 2020), an event which has the potential to shift voter attitudes and news coverage. If Biden is elected, the landscape of media coverage of women in politics is likely to transform.

The findings herein are specific to the 2020 Iowa caucuses; even within those confines there are limitations. Concerning media coverage, our outlet choice and search criteria limited the stories we analyzed. We did not include influential media such as cable television, which might produce different results. These restrictions may not be an accurate reflection of Iowans' news diets but were chosen because of their status and reputation for directing the national political conversation. This study also sampled Iowa caucus rally attendees rather than exclusively Iowa caucus goers. Future research focused on Iowa caucuses could limit the sample to eligible Iowa caucus goers, or even to Iowans exiting caucus locations after making their selections. We limited our search of news coverage to a week before and after caucus day. A different time frame may have resulted in different findings. Future work could use a longitudinal design to track voters' attitudes, and see how they potentially relate to media coverage of candidates.

Perceptions of candidates' positions on issues, personality traits, and presumed electability will likely continue to drive voter support and media coverage. This study establishes several telling relationships about how these worked for and against the Democratic candidates in 2020 based on their gender and ideological tilt. Only time will tell whether these relationships will persist in future contests.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

## Funding

## References

Abramowitz, A. I. (1989). Viability, electability, and candidate choice in a presidential primary election: A test of competing models. *Journal of Politics*, *51*(4), 977-992. https://doi.org/10.2307/2131544

Aldrich, J. H. (1980). *Before the convention: Strategies and choices in presidential nomination campaigns*. University of Chicago Press.

Bartels, L. M. (1988). *Presidential primaries and the dynamics of public choice*. Princeton University Press.

Burns, A., & Glueck, K. (2020, August 11). Kamala Harris is Biden's choice for vice president. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/11/us/politics/kamala-harris-vp-biden.html

Butler, R. L. (2009). Momentum in the 2008 presidential contests. *Polity*, *41*(3), 331-344. https://doi.org/10.1057/pol.2009.11

Clifford, S. (2014). Linking issue stances and trait inferences: A theory of moral exemplification. *Journal of Politics*, *76*(3), 698-710. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381614000176

Conover, P. J., & Feldman, S. (1982). Projection and the perception of candidates' issue positions. *Western Political Quarterly*, *35*(2), 228-244. https://doi.org/10.2307/448017

Conover, P. J., & Feldman, S. (1989). Candidate perception in an ambiguous world: Campaigns, cues, and inference processes. *American Journal of Political Science*, *33*(4), 912-940. https://doi.org/10.2307/2111115

Crooked Media. (Producer). (2019, November 19). *On the ground in Iowa* [Audio podcast]. https://crooked.com/podcast-series/iowa/

Eberl, J. M., Wagner, M., & Boomgaarden, H. G. (2017). Are perceptions of candidate traits shaped by the media? The effects of three types of media bias. *International Journal of Press/Politics*, *22*(1), 111-132. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161216674651

Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Towards clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, *43*(4), 51-58. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x

Goggin, S. N., & Theodoridis, A. G. (2017). Disputed ownership: Parties, issues, and traits in the minds of voters. *Political Behavior*, *39*(3), 675-702. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-016-9375-3

Golan, G. J., Kiousis, S. K., & Mcdaniel, M. L. (2007). Second-level agenda setting and political advertising. *Journalism Studies*, *8*(3), 432-443. https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700701276190

Hayes, D. (2005). Candidate qualities through a partisan lens: A theory of trait ownership. *American Journal of Political Science*, *49*(4), 908-923. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2005.00163.x

Heim, K. (2013). Framing the 2008 Iowa Democratic Caucuses. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *90*(3), 500-519. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699013493785

Hinckley, S. (2016, January 26). *How the Iowa caucus predicts presidential losers, not winners*. https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Politics/2016/0126/How-the-Iowa-caucus-predicts-presidential-losers-not-winners

Holian, D. B., & Prysby, C. L. (2014). *Candidate character traits in presidential elections*. Routledge.

Jones, P. E., Brewer, P. R., & Young, D. G. (2016). The effects of traditional news, partisan talk, and political satire programs on perceptions of presidential candidate viability and electability. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, *24*(3), 172-184. https://doi.org/10.1080/15456870.2016.1184666

Lucas, D. (2019, August 13). *Dozens of 2020 hopefuls aim to break through at Iowa State Fair: Pictures*. https://www.reuters.com/news/picture/dozens-of-2020-hopefuls-aim-to-break-thr-idUSRTX72UX9

Monmouth University Poll. (2019, February 4). *Dems prefer electability in 2020*. https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/reports/monmouthpoll_us_020419/

Paxton, P., & Hughes, M.M. (2017). *Women, politics, and power* (3rd ed.). Sage.

PBS LearningMedia. (2020, March 30). *The history of the Iowa Caucuses*. https://unctv.pbs-learningmedia.org/resource/iptv_caucusiowa_gallery/iptv_caucusiowa_gallery

PBS News Hour. (2019, August 9). *What voters and 2020 Democrats are saying at the Iowa State Fair*. https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/what-voters-and-2020-democrats-are-saying-at-the-iowa-state-fair

Petrocik, J. R. (1996). Issue ownership in presidential elections, with a 1980 case study. *American Journal of Political Science*, *40*(3), 825-850. https://doi.org/10.2307/2111797

Pezenik, S. (2019, August 13). *Here are 7 top moments during the Iowa State Fair*. https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/top-moments-iowa-state-fair/story?id=64914312.

Pierce, P. A. (1993). Political sophistication and the use of candidate traits in candidate evaluation. *Political Psychology*, *14*(1), 21-35. https://doi.org/10.2307/3791391

Politico. (2020, February 29). *Live election results: Iowa caucuses 2020*. https://www.politico.com/2020-election/results/iowa/.

Redlawsk, D. P., Tolbert, C. J., & Donovan, T. (2011). *Why Iowa? How caucuses and sequential elections improve the presidential nominating process*. University of Chicago Press.

Rutgers University. (2020, January 22). *Women in Elective Office 2019 archive*. https://cawp.rutgers.edu/women-elective-office-2019

Sanbonmatsu, K. (2017). *Media coverage of women candidates*. https://www.politicalparity.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Parity-Research-Women-Media.pdf

Seitz-Wald, A. (2019, June 23). "Electability" is the most important, least understood word in the 2020 race. *NBC News*. https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/electability-eye-beholder-what-hell-do-we-actually-know-about-n1020576

Simas, E. N. (2017). The effects of electability on US primary voters. *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, *27*(3), 274-290. https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2016.1270287

Stevens, M. (2020, March 15). Joe Biden commits to selecting a woman as vice president. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/15/us/politics/joe-biden-female-vice-president.html

Stone, W. J., & Rapoport, R. B. (1994). Candidate perception among nomination activists: A new look at the moderation hypothesis. *Journal of Politics*, *56*(4), 1034-1052. https://doi.org/10.2307/2132072

Utych, S. M. (2020). Man bites blue dog: are moderates really more electable than ideologues? *Journal of Politics*, *82*(1), 392-396. https://doi.org/10.1086/706054

## Author Biographies

**Cynthia Peacock** (PhD, University of Texas at Austin) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Alabama and a faculty research associate with the Center for Media Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin. Her research focuses on the ways people form, change, and express their political opinions.

**Hannah Dugger** (M.A., University of Alabama) is a journalist. Her research focuses on political journalism and its effects on political discourse, action, and civic engagement.

**J. Knox Fanelli** (B.A., University of Alabama) is a graduate student in the College of Communication and Information Sciences at the University of Alabama.

**A. Jackson Harris** (M.A., University of Alabama) is the Program Coordinator at Crossroads Civic Engagement Center and a doctoral student in the College of Communication and Information Sciences at the University of Alabama. His research focus is civic engagement and public sphere theory.

**J. Bert McLelland** (B.A., University of Alabama) is a graduate student in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Alabama.

**Lauren A. Richardson** (B.A., University of Alabama) is a graduate student in the Department of Communication Studies and research assistant at Crossroads Civic Engagement Center at the University of Alabama. Her research interests include political communication and civic dialogue.