

## Presidential Candidates Nobody Wants?

Fazekas, Zoltán; Hatemi, Peter K.

*Document Version*

Final published version

*Published in:*

Presidential Studies Quarterly

*DOI:*

[10.1111/psq.12866](https://doi.org/10.1111/psq.12866)

*Publication date:*

2024

*License*

CC BY-NC-ND

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Fazekas, Z., & Hatemi, P. K. (2024). Presidential Candidates Nobody Wants? *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 54(1), 115-129. <https://doi.org/10.1111/psq.12866>

[Link to publication in CBS Research Portal](#)

**General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us ([research.lib@cbs.dk](mailto:research.lib@cbs.dk)) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Download date: 04. Jul. 2025

## RESEARCH NOTE

# Presidential candidates nobody wants?

Zoltán Fazekas<sup>1</sup>  | Peter K. Hatemi<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Department of International Economics,  
Government and Business, Copenhagen Business  
School, Frederiksberg, Denmark

<sup>2</sup>Department of Political Science, The Pennsylvania  
State University, University Park,  
Pennsylvania, USA

## Correspondence

Peter K. Hatemi, Department of Political Science,  
The Pennsylvania State University, 307 Pond Lab,  
University Park, PA 16802, USA.  
Email: [phatemi@gmail.com](mailto:phatemi@gmail.com)

## Abstract

In a nationally representative study, we explore the public's views of the 2016 presidential nominees. Current measures generally focus on approval of given candidates with closed-ended questions, but much can be learned by soliciting the public's unconstrained candidate preferences—not only in the direction of how they feel, but the depth of their views and who they really want to see in office. Employing open-ended questions, we find that more than 75% of the voting public preferred an option other than what was offered. Even when constraining choices to politicians, the Democratic and Republican nominees were not preferred by the majority of the public, and this held true when restricting the analyses to partisans only. We further asked voters to express, in their own words, what they thought of the two candidates for president. The majority of the public described both candidates in negative terms. They spoke with deep disdain for the opposition's candidate, as well as their own party's candidate. The results add support to the view that US primary elections are failing to produce candidates who represent the public's interests and signal the potential for further instability in US government.

## KEYWORDS

Clinton, primaries, Trump, US elections

## INTRODUCTION

Central to democracies are elections that allow citizens to freely elect representatives and executives who reflect their interests (Dahl, 1982). In recent years, however, public opinion polls suggest a growing negativity toward the candidates offered (Enten, 2016; RePass, 2020), and there has been increasingly more discussion on the potential inability of the US primary system to deliver presidential nominees that the majority of the public believes should be the candidates for president (Drutman, 2018; Gardbaum & Pildes, 2018; Gehl & Porter, 2017). Arguably, the 2016 US election serves as a critical case to explore this view, where both the Democratic and Republican presidential nominees, Hillary Clinton and

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.  
© 2023 The Authors. *Presidential Studies Quarterly* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of Center for the Study of the Presidency and Congress.

Donald Trump, respectively, were the two least-liked candidates in the history of US elections up until that point (where such pre-election surveys were available; see Jacobson, 2017). Nevertheless, the 2016 election already appears more of a signal of things to come than an anomaly; many argue that an increasingly polarized two-party system has resulted in candidates further to the extremes of the political spectrum who do not reflect the median voter or the majority of the public (Brady et al., 2007; Gehl & Porter, 2017; Gerber & Morton, 1998; Hall, 2015; Jacobson, 2021; Thomsen, 2014; Westwood et al., 2018). In the 2020 presidential election, for example, after both the Republican and Democratic conventions, only a third of the public believed either Trump or Biden would be a good president (Gallup, 2020). Running up to the 2024 election, in national polls, the majority of voters do not want either candidate to run (Boak & Fingerhut, 2023; Liesman, 2022), or even believe either candidate is mentally fit for the job (Pramuk, 2020). This candidate dissatisfaction even persists with a sitting president; as of late 2023, two-thirds of Democrats do not want to see President Joe Biden as their candidate (Yang & Pengelly, 2023).

Most assessments of US presidential candidates rest largely on questions of how much the public supports a candidate or an official, how the public feels toward them (thermometer), or whom they would vote for, given an already predetermined pool of candidates, whether put forth by one of the main parties or by media elites that focus on select persons. An important question that remains understudied is whether the public is forced to choose between options they do not really want. That is, it remains unknown, or at least understudied, whether the majority, given a choice, would actually converge on different candidates than those the two-party system puts forward. And, equally important, there is limited research on what the public really thinks of the candidates offered without being constrained by the candidate choices or closed-end prompts for approval. This is important to consider, as the United States has entered into an era of increased political instability, dysfunctional and weakened government institutions, public distrust of government, and partisan-driven political violence (Azari, 2019; Levitsky & Way, 2022; Pew, 2022). We seek to offer some insight to these questions and take an approach where we asked people, in their own words, whom they wanted to see as president. We further explored what the public thought of the candidates the two parties offered, in their own words, without constraints or leading prompts. Our results based on a 2016 nationally representative study days before the presidential election find that around 75% of the electorate who explicitly stated that they voted for Clinton or Trump would have preferred another candidate, even when constraining choices to active politicians. Furthermore, the majority of the public described both the main candidates offered in negative terms. The specific terms they used provide a critical context to better understand both the feelings and perhaps unmet desires and needs of the US public.

## TRADITIONAL MEASURES OF CANDIDATE APPROVAL

How voters feel about presidential candidates is one of the most discussed political “facts” in academic study and on traditional and social media. One of the most widely used measures asks respondents whom they plan to vote for. This question, or some flavor of it, is valuable in predicting the outcome of elections (though less so recently; see Panagopoulos, 2021). These types of measures, as valuable as they are, also come with limitations, namely, in their inability to access unprimed voters' opinions of the candidate or if the candidate is their actual preference versus a conditional preference. Other common measures ask how satisfied respondents are with a specific candidate or focus on approval ratings. These types of measures offer less in the way of election prediction but are informative of the public's approval of the candidates.<sup>1</sup> However, they are restricted to comparison between only those candidates who are given.

<sup>1</sup>One caveat is that presidential support measures increasingly appear to be a proxy for partisanship as much as president or candidate approval (Small & Eisinger, 2020).

In addition, there are a number of affect and feeling measures that are less used in polling but are more common in academic studies such as the American National Election Studies. To varying degrees, these questions intentionally prime the respondent for positive and negative traits. For example, feeling thermometers rely on a 0–100 scale bookended with *warm and favorable* to *cold and unfavorable*. These types of questions offer easy-to-code interpretable data points, but like all measures there is a trade-off; they place the emotional or affective cue in the respondent's mind and thus are more subject to primed response biases (Krosnick & Kinder, 1990). This does not mean the opinion rendered is invalid, but it is more likely such opinions were not present or on the mind of the respondent before the question was presented (Zaller, 1992). Nevertheless, they do offer insight into what people think about the given candidates at that moment and within the measure's constraints. There are also candidate trait questions that focus on a set of predefined personal traits, such as competence, leadership, or trustworthiness. These questions provide a view of the public's opinions on the candidates but only in the primed domains offered; they are also subject to a different type of acquiesce response bias and demand effects. Thus, in these cases, both the candidate selection in terms of a predefined set of actors and the feature or domain selection in terms of traits deemed important will limit the scope of measurement.

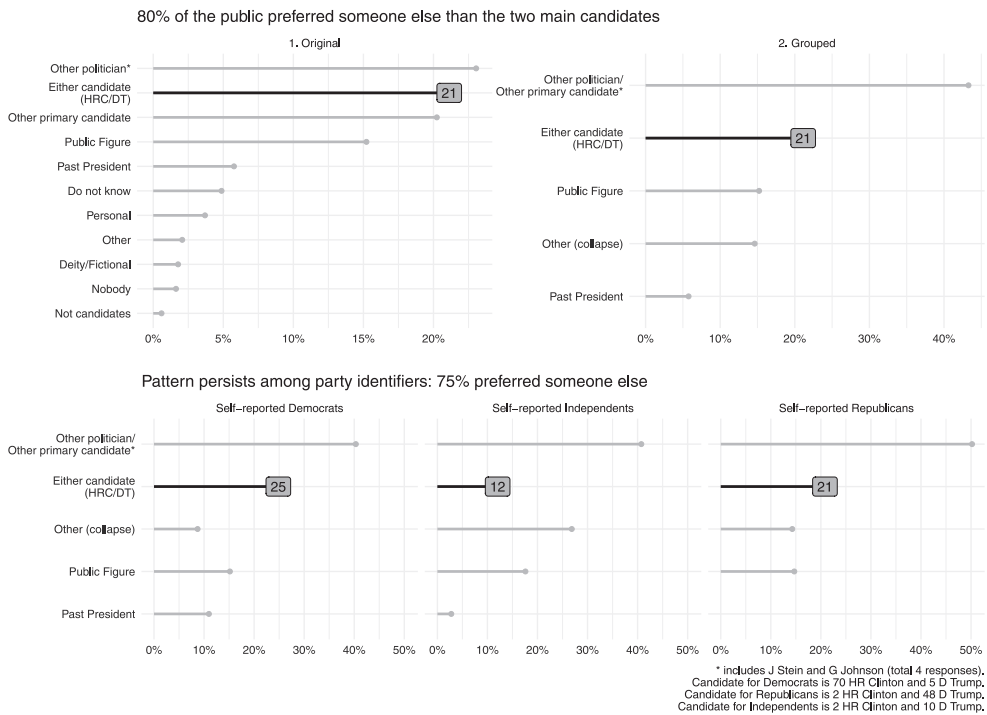
Overall, traditional measures of voter opinions offer varying benefits, including prediction of electoral outcomes and responses to predetermined affective cues. What has been less explored in empirical study are measures that ask voters, regardless of party offerings, for whom they want to vote for president, and further what they think about the candidates in their own words, without being primed or having to fit their views into predetermined adjectives or think in terms of valence. There is of course a trade-off here as well. Open-ended, unprimed responses are more difficult to analyze and offer less in the way of prediction than other measures. They require more preprocessing and run the risk of limited comparability throughout time (or space). Nevertheless, such measures provide something that traditional measures do not: unprimed or at least less primed views and, much more importantly, unconstrained views—that is, views closer to how people think versus how they are forced to vote. This is an important distinction. We contribute with such measures and present our findings in the next section.

## DATA AND METHODS

We analyze preferred candidate choice and candidate descriptions using survey data collected by YouGov between October 26 and November 1, days before the 2016 US presidential election. A stratified sampling frame of 750 individuals was drawn from the US Census American Community Survey and matched with voter registration status and turnout from the 2010 Current Population Survey. This resulted in a sample that is representative in terms of sex, age, ethnicity, education, party identification, and ideology at the least (for details on the sample, see the supplementary materials). All participants provided informed consent. All procedures contributing to this work comply with the ethical standards of the relevant national and institutional committees on human subjects and with the Helsinki Declaration of 1968, as revised in 2008.

### Preferred presidents: “Anyone other than who will be elected”

We asked participants, “Typically, when people are asked about who they think should be the President of the United States they must choose from a list of candidates nominated by the major political parties. But we want to know, if you could choose anyone to be the President of the United States, who do you think is the best person to lead our country for the next 4 years? You may choose anyone, such as someone you know personally, a politician, yourself, a public figure or any other person.” Overall, as we show in Figure 1, the two main candidates in the presidential election were far from being the top preferences: ~80% of the public named someone else they would prefer to be president. While some



**FIGURE 1** Presidential preferences.

responses featured public figures, such as Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, or a personal acquaintance, the majority of responses were viable alternatives. This finding, in and of itself, is important. Active politicians, including those who ran in the primaries, amounted to the largest share of open-ended preferences; they outweigh the two main candidates by 22%.<sup>2</sup> Based upon people's unconstrained views, the primaries did not result in candidates the public wanted, even if we restricted the list to only active politicians and legitimate contenders.

This disconnect between available choices and open-ended preferences persists among both independents and party identifiers. Potentially the most striking feature of the data is the consistency: only 25% of Democrats named either of the two main candidates as their preferred president (5 named Donald Trump), and this share was only 21% for self-identified Republicans (2 named Hillary Clinton). Among independents, the two main candidates (Trump and Clinton) did not even make it in the top three, being named by only 12% of the voters. Furthermore, as displayed in Figure 2, the same pattern persists for those respondents who said they would eventually vote for either of the two main candidates. Some 75% of the voting public that voted for Trump or Clinton preferred someone else for president.

Turning from aggregates to the individual level, in Table 1 we present results from a multiple (logistic) regression. Besides our general hypothesis that the primaries are not producing candidates the public wants, we are not testing any other specific theoretical expectations in the regressions. Rather, we use the regressions to supplement our descriptive, aggregate analysis in order to investigate potential sources of heterogeneity. We model the individual preference for anyone else but the two main candidates (1) versus preference for the two main candidates (0) as a function of sociodemographic

<sup>2</sup>We went through the verbatim answers, fixed typos, and checked for ambiguity about specific names mentioned. After that, answers were categorized according to that listed in the first panel of Figure 1 (y-axis). For the next subplots, some categories were collapsed together (all that are not included in the second panel of Figure 1), focusing on the most important remainder categories, such as other viable candidates (other politicians and primary candidates). The replication data include all verbatim answers for alternative grouping or analysis.

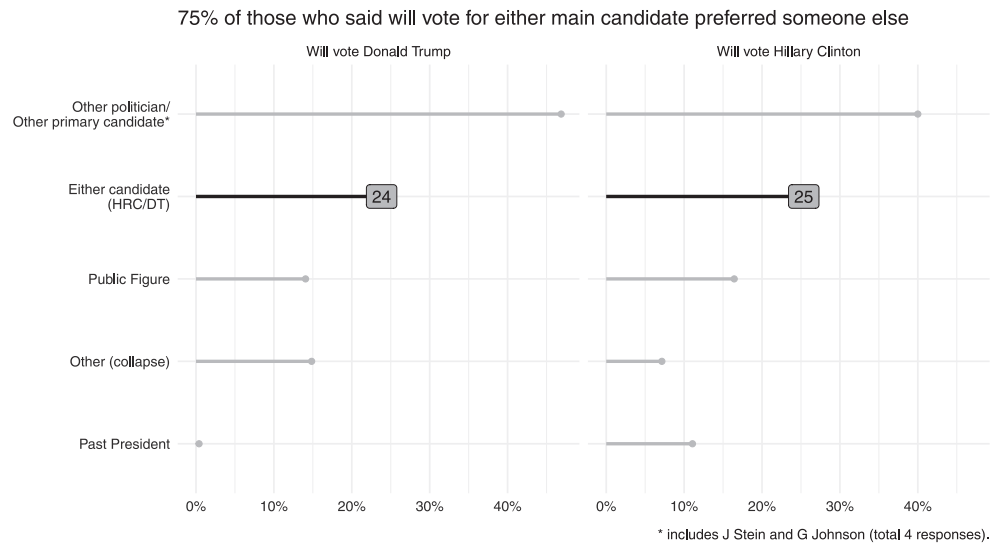


FIGURE 2 Presidential preferences among voters.

TABLE 1 Preference for alternative presidential candidates.

	Preferring alternative (=1)
Intercept	2.749*** (0.461)
Female	0.138 (0.199)
Age (in years)	-0.015* (0.007)
Not Caucasian	-0.691** (0.235)
Education (some college = 1)	0.298 (0.209)
Religiosity	-0.137 (0.090)
Political interest	-0.699 (0.401)
Strength of party ID	0.054 (0.047)
AIC	696.363
Log likelihood	-340.182
N	724

\*\*\**p* < 0.001; \*\**p* < 0.01; \**p* < 0.05.

characteristics: sex (female 1, male 0), age in years, race (all non-Caucasian [including Black, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, Other] responses grouped 1, White 0), and a categorical (higher) education measurement (1 for some college or above, 0 otherwise). In addition, we included predictor variables related to strength of religiosity (*not at all important* [0] very important [3]), interest in politics (*hardly at all following politics* [0] most of the time [1]), and the strength of party identification (going from *Independent* to *Strong Republican/Strong Democrat*, folded party ID scale).

Two sources of systematic differences are significant: older respondents and non-Caucasians are slightly more likely to prefer the establishment candidates, but only in comparison to younger or White respondents. That is, even among people older than 65 (133), there is still an overwhelming preference for alternative candidates (77% in comparison to 82% among younger respondents). Similarly, the negative effect for race is mostly driven by very high percentages of White Americans preferring alternative candidates, rather than a majority of non-Caucasian Americans preferring establishment candidates (the lowest preference for alternative candidates is among Black [69%] and Other [61%] respondents). Overall, sociopolitical or demographic variables do not appear to explain respondents' preferences for candidates not offered by the Democratic or Republican parties.

## Thoughts about the two main candidates: “Arrogant” and “liar”

How were the two presidential candidates, Trump and Clinton, viewed, if they were not the top choice for most voters? That is, were the choices “good enough”? Before providing some answers to this question, we highlight here that any postrationalization or social desirability effects regarding the expressed candidate choice would indicate that, if there is bias, the numbers for alternatives should be biased downward, with the disconnect being even larger than the one documented through survey instruments.

Without prompting for negative or positive traits or attributes, we asked participants, “What is the first word that comes to mind when you think of [Hillary Clinton/Donald Trump]?” (free response). We made very few edits to the data, and in the few instances we combined items, we explicitly note those in each instance in the main text and tables. First, we removed capitalization, so, for example, “liar” and “Liar” are identical, and then for each term we corrected any typo/mistake where it was clear what the respondent meant (e.g., “politician” instead of “politican”). Through these steps, from the original list of 277 entries for Clinton and 390 for Trump, we ended up with 257 and 321 unique entries.<sup>3</sup> When consulting the supplementary materials and the figures below, we have used \*\*\* to mitigate possible discomfort caused by the (many) profanities and vulgar formulations found in the verbatim answers. However, even with these steps, the formulations are intentionally recognizable for transparency and replication, and they could still be triggering for some readers. As an additional warning, please note that the data in our replication package contain the cleaned, but unedited entries.

The open-ended associations about the candidates are quite revealing. The public clearly had different preferences than their actual options when looking at how they viewed the candidates. We list the most common words in Figures 3 and 4.

For both candidates, only the fourth most used word has a positive association, which is “experienced” for Hillary Clinton and “leader” for Donald Trump. Rather, “liar” and “a\*\*hole” topped the list. These types of words are remarkable in both their frequency and the fact they are unprompted. It is one thing to think it, but an entirely different thing to express such dislike in a study. The feelings the public has about the candidates are not due to any type of response prompting. Rather, they appear to be how the public truly feels about the candidates. When inspecting the terms, we can see that some terms often relate to the same features, and these abound.

<sup>3</sup>For Clinton and Trump, there are 461 unique entries from the respondents: 410 of these are single-word entries, 32 are two-word entries (such as “best choice” or “con artist”), and the remainder entries are three words or longer (such as “true American, wants to turn things around”), with the maximum being 15 words.

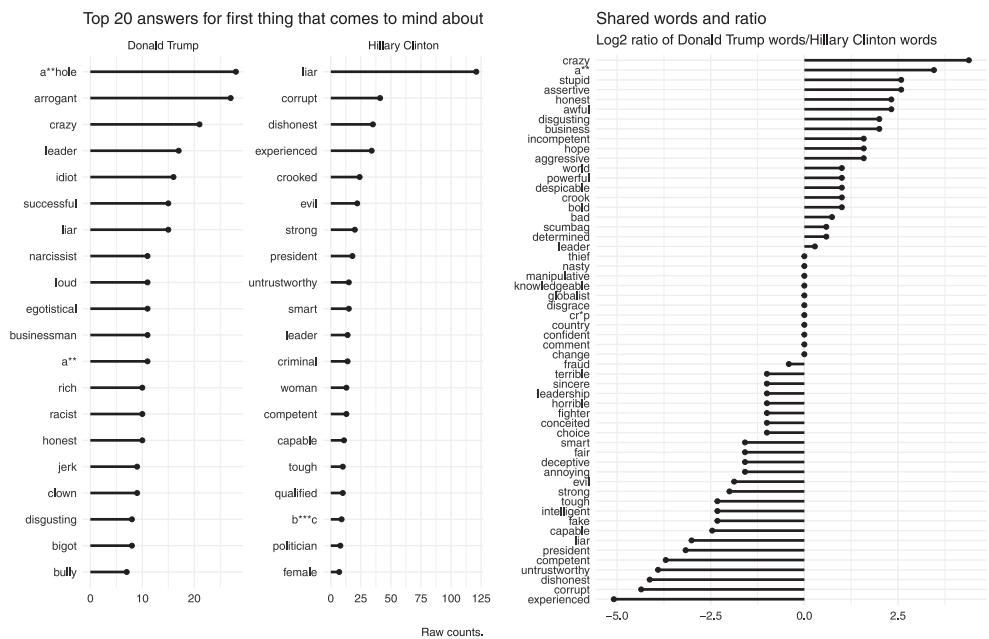


FIGURE 3 First word that comes to mind about main candidates.

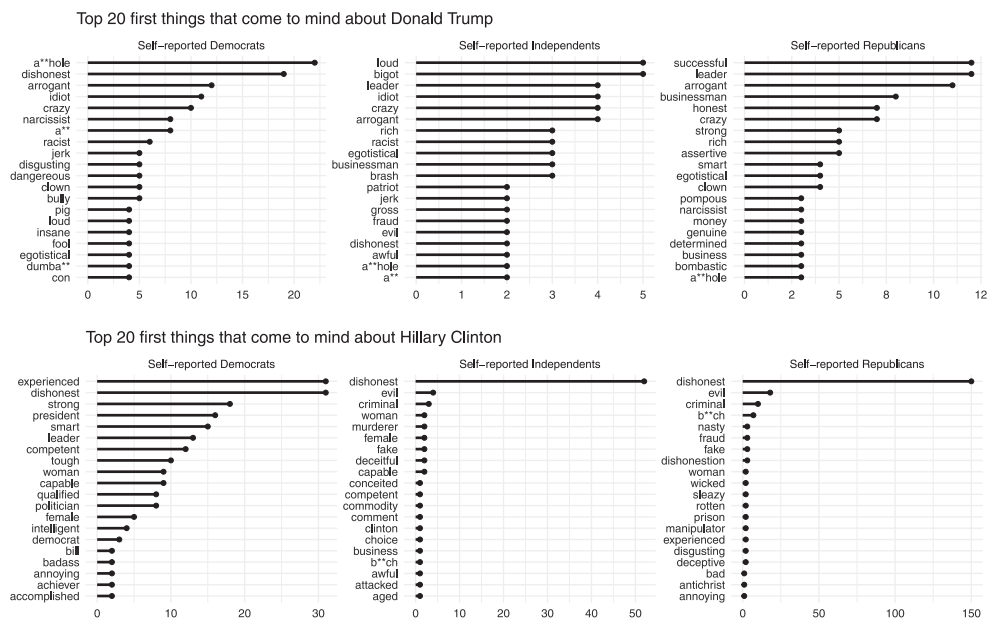


FIGURE 4 First thing that comes to mind about candidates.

For example, if we treat “liar,” “corrupt,” “dishonest,” and “untrustworthy” as synonyms, this accounts for at least 32% of the public's view of Hillary Clinton. This is likely a large underestimate since we did not count for this percentage answers with multiple words, such as “fake, liar,” or the many other words closely related to dishonesty present in the data, such as “fraud” or any broader uses of the words above.

There is also a clear divide in terms of frequency of words used for both candidates: common positive words, such as “experience” or “competence,” were used much more often for Hillary Clinton, whereas negative personal traits abound for Donald Trump. It is worth noting that the term “crooked” often used to label Hillary Clinton by the right-wing media makes frequent appearances (and only for Hillary Clinton), consistent with extant research finding significant influence of campaign rhetoric on the expressed views of the public (Sinclair et al., 2018).

For the next plot (Figure 4), in order to reduce the sparsity of the visual displays, we grouped the following words (for both candidates) into the same category, *dishonest*, as we considered them synonyms: “liar,” “corrupt,” “crooked,” “crook,” “untrustworthy,” and “untruthful.” While the specific choice of using “liar” instead of “crooked” is quite important, they are clearly interrelated and help us formulate broader conclusions at this stage. The findings across partisan groups show that, indeed, there is some divide in terms of associations, but less than one might expect. However, an important insight here is that this variance is less pronounced for Hillary Clinton. “Dishonest” (and its synonyms) was a close second in terms of frequency among her supporters and self-identified Democrats. This finding offers additional evidence in support of the view that the candidates the party chooses and what emerges from the primaries does not reflect the public's actual preferences, even among partisans. Overall, the data show a consensus, cutting almost fully across party lines, about the main negative feature of Hillary Clinton. In comparison, for Donald Trump we see more variation in the types of negative features highlighted. They seem to relate to character and style, but they are not concentrated around one specific feature.

Already when offering a more qualitative summary of our word count results, we used the terms “positive” and “negative” associations quite frequently. We manually sentiment-coded the responses and used Hu and Liu's (2004) and Young and Soroka's (2012) sentiment libraries to validate our coding. All words/statements were coded as negative (−1), neutral (0), or positive (1). Once the independent coding was concluded, any disagreement was resolved through specific case discussion. All unique terms for both Clinton and Trump and the associated sentiment coding of these are reported in the supplementary materials. Given the number of responses and short answers, we deemed human coding both tractable and suitable, and it allowed us to ensure we did not wrongfully code something out of context. For example, in the case when one respondent answered the question about Clinton, but made a negative remark about Trump, by manually coding the response, we ensured that the remark was not wrongfully attributed to Clinton. Nevertheless, along with the full data and coding reported in the supplementary material and the replication materials, we applied the two dictionary-based sentiment codings to show the validity and consistency of our coding. The Hu and Liu (2004) sentiment dictionary is based on customer reviews, and the Young and Soroka (2012) Lexicoder sentiment dictionary on political news coverage. We looked up our terms in the respective dictionaries and label them 1 for positive, −1 for negative, and 0 if we do not find them among the positive or negative terms (as they do not have any neutral entries). For both dictionaries, we calculate the average dictionary sentiment score for each of the human-labeled categories, separately for each candidate.

The results are displayed in Table 2 and indicate that, independent of approach and candidate, the human sentiment coding carries good validity: the average sentiment scores are ordered in the expected manner (where −1 is most negative, +1 is most positive). Deviations from expected scores (0 for neutrals) or the better alignment of our negative coding is mostly due to specific instances that are not labeled in the dictionaries or out of context. For example, Trump's more positive averages for the neutral human-coded category are solely driven by the terms “rich” and “wealthy,” which we labeled as neutral, although they may have a positive sentiment in many dictionaries. In contrast, terms such as “snake” or “whatever” carry no negative labels in the dictionaries; however, they were clearly used in a negative manner by our respondents.

After sentiment coding, two important, reinforcing patterns arise. Candidates were mostly described using negative words, overall, around 75% for Donald Trump and 60% for Hillary Clinton (Figure 5). The few positive associations came almost exclusively from partisans, but even here, more than 50% of Republicans did not have a positive association about Donald Trump, while this was about 30% for

TABLE 2 Sentiment coding validation.

Candidate	Human coding	Average D1	Average D2
Donald Trump	Negative (-1)	-0.651	-0.711
	Neutral (0)	0.207	0.271
	Positive (+1)	0.491	0.569
Hillary Clinton	Negative (-1)	-0.890	-0.888
	Neutral (0)	-0.006	0.048
	Positive (+1)	0.486	0.457

Note: D1 = Hu and Liu (2004). D2 = Young and Soroka (2012).

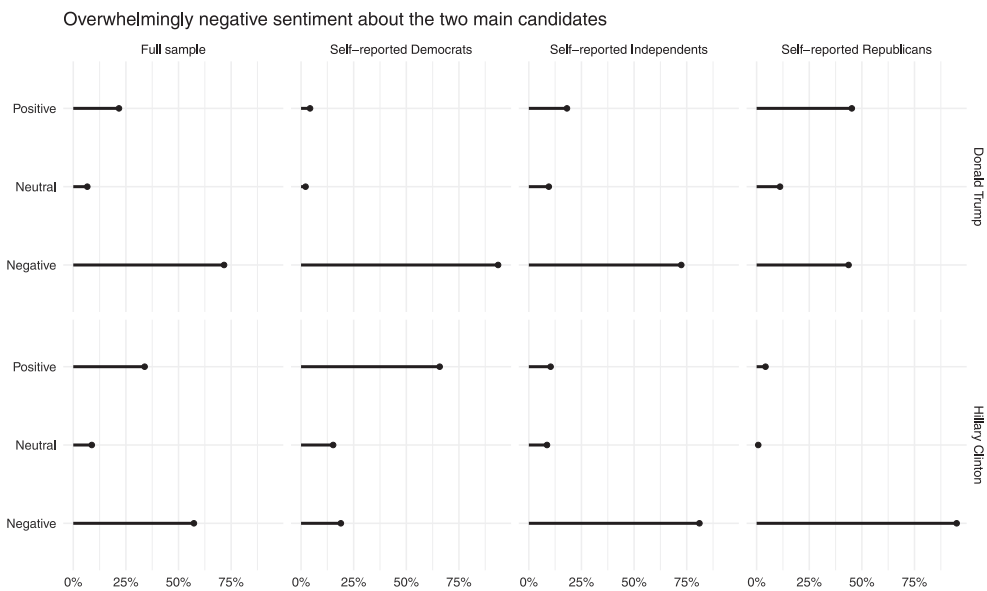
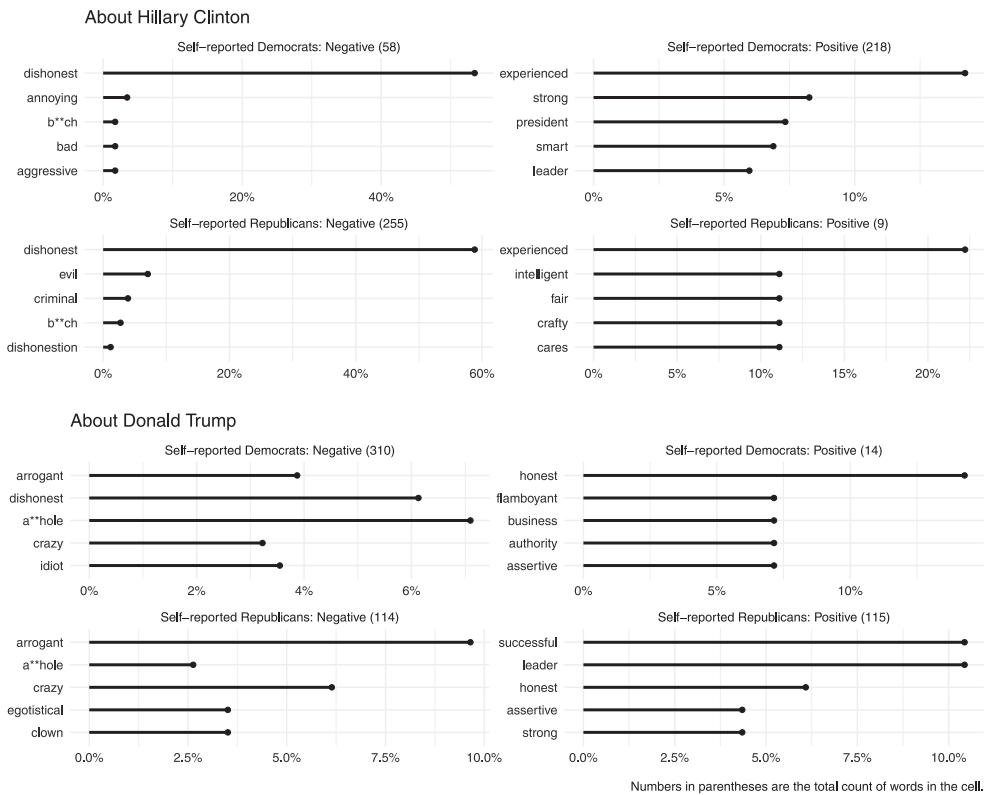


FIGURE 5 Sentiment of open-ended first associations.

Hillary Clinton among Democrats. And recall this was well after Clinton was named the party nominee, days before the election and when partisans had no other choice. As such, if history is any indication, those who had negative views of Clinton would be much higher earlier in the primary process.

Figure 6 further highlights one of the major differences between the candidates. While for both candidates there is some overlap between the most frequent negative and positive terms used by different party supporters, the distributions are very different. Close to 50% of negative terms by Democrats and 60% by Republicans are accounted for by “dishonest” and synonyms for Hillary Clinton. Yet again, this indicates unified views about negative features of the candidate, a pattern not apparent for Donald Trump. Personal trait-related qualifiers such as “arrogant” and “crazy” are predominant, but they add up to a much smaller percentage of negative terms.

Positive word associations are only listed for partisans of the candidate's party, as there are not enough meaningful positive qualifiers from opposing partisan groups. For both candidates, these top terms add up to around 35% of positive terms, suggesting a multidimensional positivity rather than one feature being representative of these candidates. There is also some overlap in positive terms (e.g.,



**FIGURE 6** Most frequent negative and positive first associations among partisans.

“leader,” “strong,” “smart”), which was not necessarily the case for negative terms; essentially, Republicans used different negative terms for Clinton and Trump.

### Primary voters' preferences and candidate descriptions

So far, using the public's own words, we have shown that the candidates offered did not enjoy top placements in the public's choices, and overall, they were viewed negatively, and these patterns were shared across party lines. However, some of these results could be contingent on how the campaigns evolved and while we have looked at all voters and partisans separately, not all participated in the primaries. Thus, we now focus only on those who voted in the primaries and offer a summary in Figures 7 and 8.

Within primary voters, who are typically more informed and more partisan, we find that, yet again, other options were preferred than what the parties offered. When we observe the differences between those who voted for either of the candidates in the primaries versus voting for other candidates, these preference differences are in the expected direction. The sentiment of open-ended terms indicates a more positive view (rather than negative or neutral) for only those who voted for the winning candidates, with more neutral mentions among those who participated in the primaries but voted for different candidates.

As a final overview, in Table 3, we fit two logistic regression models where the outcome variable is negative sentiment for Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump (1). Accordingly, we collapse the neutral and positive answers into one category (0) and use the same predictors as in the multiple regression model for alternative candidate preferences, with one distinction: rather than a folded scale, we control for

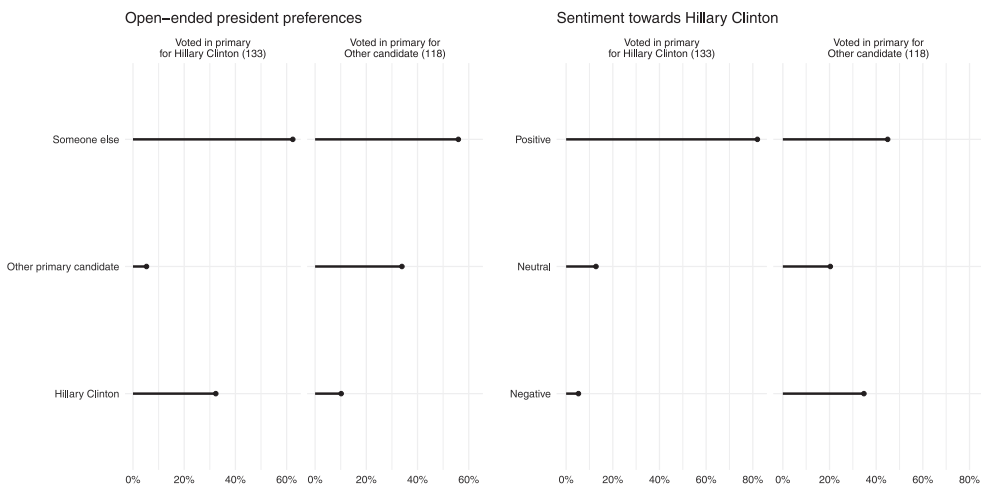


FIGURE 7 Views on the candidate across Democratic primary voters.

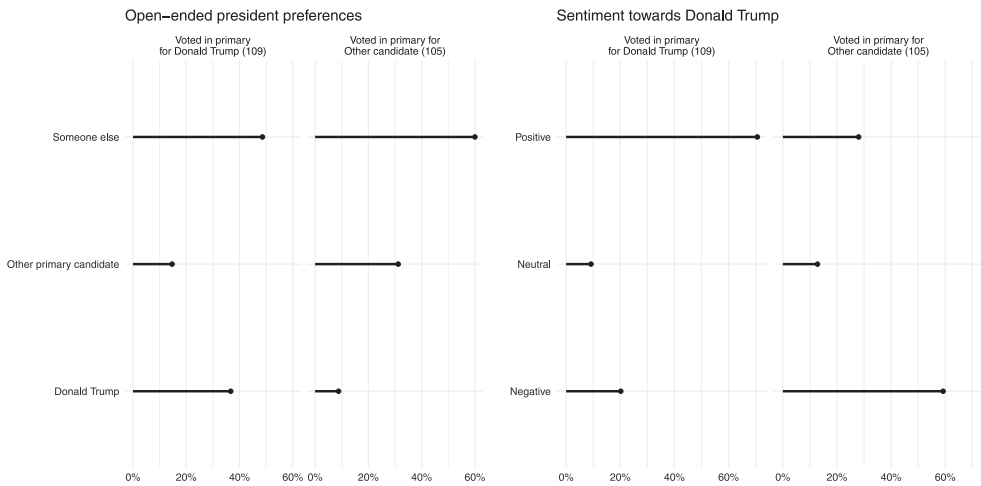


FIGURE 8 Views on the candidate across Republican primary voters.

partisanship in its original Strong Democrat to Strong Republican form. These results indicate, unsurprisingly, the partisan divide, but also less negativity from women toward Hillary Clinton and more negativity from higher educated citizens toward Donald Trump. However, we find no evidence for further heterogeneity in this mostly exploratory specification.

## DISCUSSION

In this study, we explored the public's actual preference for presidential candidates in their own words, and how they felt about the candidates offered, absent any priming. If the public are to be believed, the candidates who emerged from the 2016 primaries did not appear to offer them a candidate to vote for that the majority had positive views about. The data also imply that polls asking about voter intention or support around the two candidates offered, while important for prediction, are often misinterpreted for actual support. It is one thing to say you support one candidate over another fixed choice, but it is a

TABLE 3 Negative sentiment toward candidates.

	Negative sentiment toward HRC	Negative sentiment toward DT
Intercept	−1.363** (0.508)	3.636*** (0.493)
Female	−0.535* (0.237)	0.307 (0.209)
Age (in years)	−0.006 (0.008)	−0.005 (0.007)
Not Caucasian	−0.444 (0.284)	−0.135 (0.291)
Education (some college = 1)	0.139 (0.263)	0.455* (0.220)
Religiosity	0.030 (0.098)	−0.180 (0.095)
Political interest	−0.497 (0.438)	−0.768 (0.408)
Party ID (D to R)	1.074*** (0.077)	−0.604*** (0.056)
AIC	525.608	636.536
Log likelihood	−254.804	−310.268
N	701	701

\*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ .

different thing entirely to say you would support that candidate over other viable options or that you actually support that candidate intrinsically. This is evident in our findings—only a very small proportion of the people who said they would vote for either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump actually named them as their preferred candidate. One rather simple, yet important, implication of our results is that professional, polling, or academic surveys would benefit from incorporating more unprimed, open-ended tasks to gain context of otherwise unmeasured preferences or support. While it is possible some of the striking discrepancies documented here could be related to the specific nature of the 2016 presidential campaign, this seems unlikely given what we already know about 2020 and 2024. And even if in the unlikely event public support for the candidates offered change for the better in the future, such responses still help explain the reasons why the public supports or dislikes a candidate and more importantly the depth of how they actually feel.

We found this to be the case here. The normalization of toxic language through leader role models has gained much attention, but only recently (Theocharis et al., 2020). Buttressing studies of interpersonal discussion, whether that is in-person or online, our open-ended responses use a standardized approach to provide additional evidence of a general toxicity that goes beyond simple negativity. This is reflected both by a hatred for the opposition's political party and a high level of within-party disdain. It would have been impossible to consider even the possibility of an insurrection in 2000 when the country waited on *Bush v. Gore*. January 6, 2021, did not usher the United States into a new era; rather, our data provide some evidence that era was already upon us by 2016. The insurrection

reflected more than elite manipulation of the masses or a campaign of misinformation, but rather the success of that campaign appears to be in part due to the disconnection between party elites and the public's will (Leonhardt, 2022).

The public appears to despise their own candidates as much as the other party, and as our data show, this disdain is well articulated. Using words like b\*\*ch, a\*\*hole, and scores of other negative terms to describe the top two presidential candidates reflects more than disapproval. It arguably reflects an invalidation of the primary system and an angry and disenfranchised public. Certainly our findings provide some support that there is a cost to all those Supreme Court decisions over the last century, which in almost every instance where the public attempted to insert some regulation on political parties, the courts favored party control of elections versus that of the public (Mayer, 2007; Mayer & Busch, 2003). It also stands to reason that such public disdain of the candidates will have a meaningful impact on how effective presidents can be once elected. The power of the presidency is as much about image, the bully pulpit, and public support as it is executive control. A weak president vis à vis Congress was a danger President Woodrow Wilson feared, a “legislative tyranny,” where Congress becomes “a despot who has unlimited time—who has unlimited vanity—who has, or believes he has, unlimited comprehension” (Wilson, 2017). Congress's actions through both the Trump presidency and Biden's current presidency offer some support for Wilson's concerns. But more generally, a president who has little public support the moment they take office is less likely to be an effective leader throughout their presidency (Brody, 1991) and more likely to create further public dissatisfaction.

What does it mean if the overwhelming majority of the public (more than 75% in our data) would like to have the option to vote for another person for president versus what was offered? In a functioning democracy, the conventional wisdom is that the public would be able to vote for presidential candidates who represent their interests. However, in order for this to occur, it would require elected legislative representatives to reform the system, remove barriers for nonpartisan entrants, and change the primary system to where candidates other than those from the two main parties have the same chances and rules for getting on the ballot—that is, a weakening of the partisan control of US elections. However, even if there were public motivation toward such action, the only means to change election laws remain in the hands of the Republican and Democratic parties, which have little incentive to make changes that would remove any of their control of the system. Yet, if no reform is made, and conditions remain the same, we must consider the potential for even greater disdain for the candidates offered and even greater public unrest and frustration with their government and the very real consequences of a disenfranchised public.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data for this study is publicly available on the author's dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/HKMNHC>.

## ORCID

Zoltán Fazekas  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8938-2903>

Peter K. Hatemi  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6514-2614>

## REFERENCES

- Azari, Julia. 2019. “It's the Institutions, Stupid: The Real Roots of America's Political Crisis.” *Foreign Affairs* 98: 52.
- Boak, Josh, and Hannah Fingerhut. 2023. “Biden 2024? Most Democrats Say No Thank You: AP-NORC Poll.” *Associated Press*, February 6.
- Brady, David W., Hahrie Han, and Jeremy C. Pope. 2007. “Primary Elections and Candidate Ideology: Out of Step with the Primary Electorate?” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 32(1): 79–105. <https://doi.org/10.3162/036298007X201994>
- Brody, Richard. 1991. *Assessing the President: The Media, Elite Opinion, and Public Support*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Dahl, Robert Alan. 1982. *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy: Autonomy vs. Control* (Vol. 31). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Drutman, Lee. 2018. “Why America's 2-Party System Is on a Collision Course with Our Constitutional Democracy.” *Vox*. <https://www.vox.com/polyarchy/2018/3/26/17163960/america-two-partysystem-constitutional-democracy>.
- Enten, Harry. 2016. “Americans' Distaste for Both Trump and Clinton Is Record-Breaking.” *Five Thirty-Eight*.

- Gallup. 2020. "Gallup Poll Social Series: Work and Education." In *Secondary Gallup Poll Social Series: Work and Education*, ed. Secondary Gallup.
- Gardbaum, Stephen, and Richard H. Pildes. 2018. "Populism and Institutional Design: Methods of Selecting Candidates for Chief Executive." *New York University Law Review* 93: 647.
- Gehl, Katherine, and Michael E. Porter. 2017. "Why Competition in the Politics Industry Is Failing America: A Strategy for Reinvigorating Our Democracy." Harvard Business School report.
- Gerber, Elisabeth R., and Rebecca B. Morton. 1998. "Primary Election Systems and Representation." *Journal of Law, Economics, & Organization* 14(2): 304–24.
- Hall, Andrew B. 2015. "What Happens When Extremists Win Primaries?" *American Political Science Review* 109(1): 18–42. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055414000641>
- Hu, Mingqing, and Bing Liu. 2004. "Mining Opinion Features in Customer Reviews." *American Association for Artificial Intelligence* 4(4): 755–60.
- Jacobson, Gary C. 2017. "The Triumph of Polarized Partisanship in 2016: Donald Trump's Improbable Victory." *Political Science Quarterly* 132(1): 9–41. <https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.12572>
- Jacobson, Gary C. 2021. "Driven to Extremes: Donald Trump's Extraordinary Impact on the 2020 Elections." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 51(3): 492–521. <https://doi.org/10.1111/psq.12724>
- Krosnick, Jon A., and Donald R. Kinder. 1990. "Altering the Foundations of Support for the President through Priming." *American Political Science Review* 84(2): 497–512. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1963531>
- Leonhardt, David. 2022. "A Crisis Coming: The Twin Threats to American Democracy." *New York Times*.
- Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan Way. 2022. "America's Coming Age of Instability: Why Constitutional Crises and Political Violence Could Soon Be the Norm." *Foreign Affairs*, January 20. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2022-01-20/americas-coming-age-instability>
- Liesman, Steve. 2022. "Majority of Americans Don't Want Biden or Trump to Run Again in 2024." CNBC Survey Shows. <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/12/09/majority-of-americans-dont-want-biden-or-trump-to-run-again-in-2024-cnbc-survey-shows.html>
- Mayer, William G. 2007. "Testimony on Federal Primary Legislation." In *Senate Bill 1905*.
- Mayer, William G., and Andrew E. Busch. 2003. *The Front-Loading Problem in Presidential Nominations*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.
- Panagopoulos, Costas. 2021. "Polls and Elections Accuracy and Bias in the 2020 US General Election Polls." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 51(1): 214–27. <https://doi.org/10.1111/psq.12710>
- Pew. 2022. "Americans' Views of Government: Decades of Distrust, Enduring Support for Its Role."
- Pramuk, Jacob. 2020. "Most Voters Don't See Trump and Biden as Mentally Fit to Be President, New Poll Shows." *CNBC*. <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/09/10/2020-election-news-voters-see-trump-biden-as-mentally-unfit-to-be-president.html>
- RePass, David E. 2020. *Listening to the American Voter: What Was on Voters' Minds in Presidential Elections, 1960 to 2016*. New York: Routledge.
- Sinclair, Betsy, Steven S. Smith, and Patrick D. Tucker. 2018. "It's Largely a Rigged System: Voter Confidence and the Winner Effect in 2016." *Political Research Quarterly* 71(4): 854–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912918768006>
- Small, Raphael, and Robert M. Eisinger. 2020. "Whither Presidential Approval?" *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 50(4): 845–63. <https://doi.org/10.1111/psq.12680>
- Theocharis, Yannis, Pablo Barberá, Zoltán Fazekas, and Sebastian Adrian Popa. 2020. "The Dynamics of Political Incivility on Twitter." *Sage Open* 10(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244020919447>
- Thomsen, Danielle M. 2014. "Ideological Moderates Won't Run: How Party Fit Matters for Partisan Polarization in Congress." *The Journal of Politics* 76(3): 786–97. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381614000243>
- Westwood, Sean J., Shanto Iyengar, Stefaan Walgrave, Rafael Leonisio, Luis Miller, and Oliver Strijbis. 2018. "The Tie That Divides: Cross-National Evidence of the Primacy of Partisanship." *European Journal of Political Research* 57(2): 333–54. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12228>
- Wilson, Woodrow. 2017. *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics*. New York: Routledge.
- Yang, Mary, and Martin Pengelly. 2023. "Majority of Likely Democratic Voters Say Party Should Ditch Biden, Poll Shows." *The Guardian*, September 7.
- Young, Lori, and Stuart Soroka. 2012. "Affective News: The Automated Coding of Sentiment in Political Texts." *Political Communication* 29(2): 205–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2012.671234>
- Zaller, John. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

**Zoltán Fazekas** is an associate professor of Business and Politics, with a focus on quantitative methods in the Department of International Economics, Government and Business at the Copenhagen Business School. His research is focused on political behavior at the voter and the elite level residing at the intersection of political psychology, political communication, and comparative

politics. His methods are mostly focused on quantitative text analysis techniques and hierarchical models.

**Peter K. Hatemi** is a distinguished professor of Political Science, Cofund Microbiology, and Biochemistry at Penn State University. He conducts research in the fields of individual differences in preferences, decision making, and social behaviors on a wide range of topics, including political behaviors and attitudes, addiction, political violence and terrorism, public health, gender identification, religion, mate selection, and the nature of interpersonal relationships. He works in public policy, law, health care, and national defense in the government, private, and public sectors.

## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

**How to cite this article:** Fazekas, Zoltán, and Peter K. Hatemi. 2023. "Presidential Candidates Nobody Wants?" *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/psq.12866>