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Branded: The Importance of Names in Politics

Kirk Snider and Haley McCormick

Introduction

When studying the effect of politicians on the political realm as a whole, we might ask ourselves how important is a name? Brand names are commonplace in the everyday lives of Americans. Whether it is the purchase of cereal or a new car, the name of the product is significant in the decision-making process. A name attachment can create a sense of luxury or a sense of dependability when choosing between products. This same phenomenon occurs with a politician’s name. An officeholder’s name may persuade voters to believe something they may not have already or to vote in a certain way. This happens merely because they trust the politician and trust the actions he is taking while serving them.

The aim of our research is to identify whether or not attaching the name of a well-known public figure to a public works project would increase or decrease support of that project. In studying the Provo City Mayoral Election of 2009, we decided to examine the name effect of the outgoing mayor on a public building project that would soon be implemented in the city. Participating with the Utah Colleges Exit Poll, we developed questions and included them on surveys administered to voters to measure the effect name branding played on supporting the building of a new recreation center. Both questions gauged support of a new recreation center; however, one form included the name attachment of Mayor Lewis K. Billings while the other did not. The inclusion of the departing mayor’s name allowed us to examine several theoretical issues. The question of trust in local political figures was a major focus. Whether the people of Provo felt Mayor Billings was a trustworthy leader would undoubtedly influence the support for a proposal using his name. We also raised the question of whether support
for Mayor Billings’ idea would be boosted simply by his retirement from office. The idea of the public giving the outgoing politician a “pat on the back” as he leaves office would be an important factor as to whether or not policies supported by the politician would be supported by his constituents. On the other hand, we sensed many Provo citizens were disappointed with other policies enacted and public works projects implemented while Billings was in office. The implications of these perceptions would generate less support for the new recreation center in the survey responses. We found there was a statistically significant correlation between the name of the outgoing mayor and the support of the building of a new recreation center. Ultimately, the inclusion of a politician’s name in this specific study did have a negative impact on how respondents viewed his “product”—the new recreation center.

**Literature and Theory**

By attending town hall meetings, monitoring local media outlets, and speaking with prominent and knowledgeable members of the Provo community, we discovered several issues that could be relevant in examining public opinion towards elected officials. In particular, the issue of iProvo seemed to strike a chord with the general public as being a very regrettable endeavor. The mismanagement of this fiber-optic Internet infrastructure became a blemish upon the latter end of the mayor’s term, effectively ending his candidacy for another re-election. This type of bad publicity led us to question if attaching his name to a popular public works project would lead to its disapproval.

The concept of iProvo was first brought to the city council in the 1990s. Much debate ensued on whether this new project would be beneficial to the community and a worthwhile investment. In 2004, construction finally began, taking nearly two years to complete. Fiber-optic lines now ran between homes, businesses, and municipal buildings including schools, hospitals, and traffic signals. This provided resources for a city-wide service company to deliver affordable Internet access to community members. However, the management of iProvo was seen as a large burden for the city to handle, being the largest municipally owned fiber-to-the-home network in the nation. The city council unexpectedly decided to sell the service to another network managing company called Broadweave. Although Broadweave anticipated turning iProvo around and generating marginal profit, they were forced to merge with another company, Veracity. This new holder of the project not only owed the city $39.5 million but also asked for the monthly payments to the city to be reduced by about 30 percent in order to gain capital. Veracity would pay the full amount due plus interest at a later date than scheduled; however, many citizens still felt iProvo had been a large disaster for the city. Many seemed to believe the local government was at fault for the issues that had arisen and much blame had been placed upon the mayor who had served for the last three terms (Toth 2009).
Knowledge of the political climate surrounding public sentiment toward Mayor Billings led us to make three claims: First, he was not viewed in a favorable light when it came to the management of iProvo. Second, he was retiring from office, so he might receive support and approval due to his voluntary decision to not run for reelection after serving twelve years. Third, the public feeling toward Billings would have an impact on a new policy he proposed that is attached to his name.

Because of the negative publicity Mayor Billings received for supporting iProvo, we assumed the level of trust in the local government structure has been shaken. In assuming that such distrust exists in the local political climate, there is a strong likelihood the residents of Provo would be more aware of local issues that could possibly affect their community. Such an awareness of local issues would foster a greater involvement on the part of the citizenry, which would manifest itself in an increase in individual participation with the political process (Bowler 2007). Consequently, any projects started by government officials would either be widely supported or widely condemned by the voting public in relation to their trust in the local officials. This support or distrust of local issues could be influenced by the voluntary departure of an unpopular politician, as is the case for Mayor Billings.

The literature in relation to the effectiveness of incumbents that are considered “lame ducks” suggests publicity in the media can have a lasting impact on the credibility of the politician leaving office (Johnson 1986, 52). Consequently, any suggestions on future works by political figures that are not in viable contention for reelection can be seen as “pitiful last gasps of a dying giant,” which could in turn change support for a neutral policy proposal (Johnson 1986, 50). This study focused on “lame duck” presidents, but we argue this can be applied to any executive officeholder who announces they will not run for reelection or who has reached their term limits and is waiting to be replaced. We extend the theory presented by asserting that when a politician leaving office is perceived negatively by their constituents and the media, their policy proposals will be branded with their negative name and not receive public support. In general, we assert that public opinion does have an effect on public policy implementation. What is often in question within the discipline of political science, however, is the extent of its effect. According to Burstein, “Public opinion affects policy three-quarters of the times its impact is gauged; its effect is of substantial policy importance at least a third of the time, and probably a fair amount more” (Burstein 2003, 36). Taking into consideration that public opinion has an effect on policy 75 percent of the time it is considered, we also assert the public’s perception of individual political actors is a critical factor. For those who are trying to pass policy legislation, any negative attachment to bad projects or unpopular individuals within the political environment can influence the passing of future proposals. The literature that examines policy implementation suggests there are four sets of variables needed to be present in order to execute policies on the local level, which are “characteristics
of the policy and its goals, characteristics of implementing agencies, variations on administrative and governmental processes, and beliefs and attitudes towards key policy actors" (Harbin et al. 1992, 105; emphasis added). Assuming this to be true, a government trying to implement a policy will not be able to do so if there are negative attitudes toward the main political actors. This study validates our theory; politicians with a negative name connotation will have a difficult time receiving public support and will, therefore, have difficulty in passing a policy, proposal, or project branded with his or her name.

Our hypothesis is that if Mayor Billings' name is included with a question about approval for a new recreation center, then the overall approval for that project will be lower than if his name is not included. In analyzing the data we have in relation to his public approval, we also hypothesize that constituents with negative feelings toward Mayor Billings will be less likely to support a new recreation center if it has his name on it. Our final hypothesis is that respondents who feel iProvo was a bad idea will be less likely to support the new recreation center proposed by Mayor Billings, because our assumptions are grounded in the public sentiment towards the iProvo issue.

Methods

To test these hypotheses, the dependent variable is the approval for the recreation center as measured by a five-point approval scale (strongly approve is equal to one; strongly disapprove is equal to five). The independent variable is the presence or absence of Mayor Billings' name within the question concerning the building of the recreation center. A secondary issue we chose to analyze concerned the letter grade given to Mayor Billings by the voting public. In the analysis of his letter grade, the approval of the recreation center is still the dependent variable, but Mayor Billings' letter grade is the main independent variable. Hence, we test the effect of his approval on levels of support for the recreation center he proposed. The letter grade variable is coded on a scale from 1 to 12 (1=A, 2=A-, 3=B+, etc). To check our assumption that attitudes toward iProvo had an impact on perceptions of Mayor Billings, we also ran a test where Billings' letter grade was the dependent variable and whether a respondent thought iProvo was a good idea as the independent variable. This was measured on a scale from one to five; one being strongly disagree and five being strongly agree (See Appendix A).

In order to test our hypotheses we incorporated our questions on the survey from the Utah Colleges Exit Poll. This was administered to voters in the Provo City 2009 Municipal Elections on 3 November. The survey was created by a committee of students (including ourselves) in a political science course at Brigham Young University dedicated to conducting exit polls. We were guided in our survey creation by professors Quin Monson and Kelly Patterson. We sampled from every voting precinct in the city using two separate survey forms throughout the day. We recruited students from BYU
to administer the surveys at the various locations throughout the city. Respondents were randomly selected by creating intervals according to the expected turnout for each precinct, thereby ensuring every voter in Provo had an equal chance of being asked to respond to both survey forms. After collection, the surveys were taken to a local Utah company called DataWise that entered all of the results in a file we then could use to run our statistical analyses. We used the computer program STATA in order to run these statistical tests.

**Analysis**

The survey responses showed the issue of building a new recreation center is popular among the citizens of Provo. The form that included Mayor Billings’ name in the recreation center question indicated that 54.85 percent of those surveyed would be in favor of building the new center, while 59.62 percent of those surveyed supported its construction on the form that excluded his name in the question. Although there is a majority of support in both questions, there is a 5 percent discrepancy between the form that included Billings’ name and the form that did not. When examining this shift, it appears the difference is between those who strongly supported the initiative on the first form and those who opposed it on the second. The difference in the strongly favored response shifted from 20.85 percent on the form including his name to 25.28 percent on the form that did not. The majority of the 5 percent change appears to have ended up in the oppose response, with 12.71 percent opposing the plan with the mayor’s name, and 8.39 percent opposing the plan without the mayor’s name (See Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support of Rec. Center</th>
<th>Form w/ Name (%)</th>
<th>Form w/o Name (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Favor</td>
<td>20.85</td>
<td>25.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favor</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>34.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neither Favor nor Oppose</td>
<td>28.21</td>
<td>28.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppose</td>
<td>12.71</td>
<td>8.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Oppose</td>
<td>4.24</td>
<td>3.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>897</td>
<td>894</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Utah Colleges Exit Poll data 2009)

The scale used to measure support for the recreation center was an approval scale of five options from one (strongly approve) to five (strongly oppose). The mean of the responses on the form that included Mayor Billings’ name was 2.45 on the recreation approval scale, and the mean of the responses on the form that did not include his name was 2.31, a statistically significant difference (p=0.04). This means those who received
the form with Mayor Billings' name were less supportive of the construction of a new recreation center. The finding of our analysis suggests the reputation of a politician to the general public can have an influence on the support of a public work (See Table 2).

**Table 2: Comparison of means test of the two forms used in the exit poll.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support for rec. center</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form with Billings' name</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>897</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Form w/o Billings' name</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

P-value: 0.04  
t-value of t-test: 2.89  
(Source: Utah Colleges Exit Poll data 2009)  
(For method, see Appendix B: I)

To better quantify our findings, we created a linear regression that compared the two forms. We discovered that those who were presented a question about building a new recreation center without Mayor Billings' name on it were 0.15 units lower on the approval scale (which indicates more support of the initiative) than those who were presented the question with his name. However, the variable of this regression explains less than 0.47 percent of the variance in opinion (See Table 3). Once again, the public perception of a public official had a statistically significant influence on the support of the public project.

**Table 3: Linear regression analysis of support for the recreation center in relation to the color of form the respondent received.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support of rec. center</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Color of form</td>
<td>-0.15*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.0047</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*significance greater than 1 percent  
(Source: Utah Colleges Exit Poll data 2009)  
(For method, see Appendix B: II)

The next set of data we examined utilized the letter grade question rating Mayor Billings' performance throughout his tenure as well as public support for the building of the recreation center. Since the letter grade question was exclusive to a single form, we were not able to include responses from both forms when running the data analysis. In trying to determine the factors that influenced his support within the community, we created several binary variables we could use to examine support of the recreation center by the public. The use of binary variables made the coefficients easier to interpret and allowed us to determine which factors contributed most to feelings about the recreation center. We used a linear regression that would tell us the influence each variable has on public opinion concerning the recreation center. The variables included
in the regression were: marital status, income, level of conservatism, party affiliation, number of children, level of education, and feelings toward iProvo (See Appendix B: III). Since the issue of iProvo was pivotal in the creation of our hypothesis, we decided to run two regressions, one excluding the iProvo variable and one that included it. The results we present will follow in that order.

In the first regression that excluded the iProvo variable, we found there were three statistically significant variables: the grade given to Mayor Billings, conservative self-identification, and to a lesser extent, income, which was significant only at the 10 percent level. From the regression, we discovered as the letter grade of Mayor Billings decreased by one unit (from A to A-, or from A- to B+, etc.), the support for the recreation center decreased by 0.11 on a scale of five with a p-value of 0.00. Those who considered themselves conservative were more likely to oppose the building of the recreation center by 0.25 on the five-point approval scale than someone who did not consider themselves conservative, with a p-value of 0.05. A one unit increase in income classification resulted in a 0.04 unit increase in support for the recreation center on a scale of five with a p-value of 0.06. Of the three variables, the letter grade the respondents gave Mayor Billings had the greatest predictive value when trying to determine whether a respondent would support the new recreation center or not. The difference between someone who gave the mayor an “A” and a person who gave him a “B” would result in a 0.33 drop in support for the recreation center. The next closest variable is the level of conservatism (0.25). The R-squared value of this regression was 0.1016, which means the variables in this particular regression only predicted 10.16 percent of the variance in a respondent’s support for the recreation center (see Table 4). The results of this regression were still only a partially complete without the inclusion of the iProvo variable.

Table 4: Linear regression analysis of support for the recreation center with variables from the exit poll survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support for Rec. Center as determined by the following variables</th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Letter Grade for Mayor Billings</td>
<td>0.11*</td>
<td>0.10*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>0.25**</td>
<td>0.23**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>-0.04+</td>
<td>-0.03+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Graduate</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iProvo</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-0.09*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>10.19</td>
<td>10.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*significance greater than 1 percent  
**significance greater than 5 percent  
+significance greater than 10 percent  
(Source: Utah Colleges Exit Poll data 2009)
In the second regression, we included all of the same variables as the first regression, with the inclusion of the iProvo variable. The significance of each variable was affected by its inclusion, and the number of variables that became significant increased from three to four. We found the factors that significantly influenced the support or opposition of building the recreation center were the grade given to Mayor Billings, how conservative a person identified themselves as being, and the opinion of whether iProvo was a good idea or not. Income was still significant at the 10 percent level, but its significance dropped from a p-value of 0.06 to 0.08 with the inclusion of the iProvo variable. From the regression, we discovered as the letter grade for Mayor Billings decreased by one unit (from A to A-, or from A- to B+, etc.), the support for the recreation center decreased by 0.10 on a scale of 5 (from one strongly approve to five strongly disapprove) with a p-value of 0.00. The public’s opinion of iProvo was also a strong indicator of its support for the recreation center. As iProvo approval decreased, support for the building of the recreation center decreased as well by 0.09 on the scale of 5 with a p-value of 0.01. This means people who thought iProvo was a bad idea were less likely to support the building of the recreation center as well. The greatest predictor of support in the regression was still the letter grade given to Mayor Billings by the respondents. The difference between those who gave the Mayor an “A” and a those who gave him a “B” was a 0.30 drop in support for the recreation center, with a p-value of 0.00. The R-squared value of this regression was 0.1092, which means the variables in this particular regression only predicted 10.92 percent of the variance in a respondent’s support for the recreation center. From these results, we see there is once again a significant relationship between the public’s perception of the former mayor and support for a new recreation center. Yet the influence of iProvo on the letter grade of Mayor Billings is still important to examine.

By establishing that the letter grade given to Mayor Billings and the public sentiment about iProvo were significant factors in predicting support for the building of a new recreation center, we decided to look at the effect iProvo had on the letter grade itself. In order to examine this possible correlation, we used another linear regression. Our findings supported our initial hypothesis that feelings toward iProvo were indicative of feelings toward Mayor Billings. In analyzing the data, for a unit decrease in support of iProvo on the five point scale, there was a 0.68 decrease in the letter grade for Mayor Billings, with a p-value of 0.00. This means if a respondent moved on the response scale in the direction of not viewing iProvo as a good idea, their letter grade of Mayor Billings would decrease by 0.68 for each shift in negative opinion. The R-squared value for this regression is 0.1018, which means a respondent’s feelings about iProvo predicted about 10 percent of their approval of Mayor Billings (see Table 5). This is significant when you consider it is only one in a wide range of issues within the mayoral campaign. This statistical analysis validates our initial assumption that iProvo affected the public’s perception of Mayor Billings.
Conclusion

The results of all of these statistical tests allow us to suggest the impact of Mayor Billings' name decreased voter support of the proposed new recreation center. The implications of such findings could prove very important to local officials in the Provo area elsewhere in the United States. Lawmakers should recognize the approval or disapproval of a prominent elected official could greatly influence whether a proposed policy receives public support. This being said, public officials should be wary of how they frame new proposals and issues to constituents. If they are not receiving overwhelming support from their community members, it is possible they will have a more difficult time implementing new policies or embarking on new projects. This phenomenon is also evident at the national level of politics as well. Near the end of his term in office, President George W. Bush had a very low approval rating of 33 percent. Members of Congress who were in his own party did not openly accept endorsements for office, presidential support for their bills, and so on. Republican candidates in 2008 made it a point to distance themselves from the current president. John McCain tried valiantly to show the American public he would not be an extension of George W. Bush's eight years in office. Barack Obama used this to his advantage and focused on the change that needed to occur in Washington and went on to win the election with 53 percent of the popular vote as opposed to McCain's 46 percent. This example in national politics illustrates on a broader and more general scale the effect that occurred in the survey results from Provo, Utah.

As in any research in the discipline of political science, ours certainly has its limitations. One concern may be that the support for the new recreation center was so high, that the effect of Billings' name did not have a very substantive impact, regardless of statistical significance. The form that included his name would generate an average that increased opposition to the center by .11 on the scale of one to five. Although there was a statistical difference between this average and the average from the form not including his name, arguably, one could say this may not be a large difference overall. Another limitation might be the issue we chose to test in the community was very middle-of-the-road, so to speak. The recreation center received very broad support on both forms; this could suggest the influence of Billings' name could have been minimal and lack substantive significance, despite its statistical significance. The fact that our R-squared values are extremely low could be considered another

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Table 5: Linear regression analysis of Mayor Billings' letter grade in relation to iProvo support

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Letter Grade for Mayor Billings</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>iProvo</td>
<td>-0.68*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.1018</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*significance greater than 1 percent
(Source: Utah Colleges Exit Poll data 2009)
limitation in our study. This means in our first regression (which examined support for the recreation center in relation to the inclusion or exclusion of Billings' name) we were unable to predict much of the variance of support by knowing whether his name was included or not, as the R-squared value was only 0.47 percent. Our regression that examined the factors which predicted support for the recreation center only had an R-squared value of 10 percent meaning that by knowing all of the variables we did (including how the respondent graded Mayor Billings), we could only predict 10 percent of the variance in support for the new recreation center. Both of these values suggest there are issues outside of our analysis that had an impact on people's perception of Mayor Billings and the public works project in general. This could be categorized as omitted variable bias, which is seen as a limitation of our study. If we had further time and resources, we would try to formulate more questions that would help reveal why the public responded the way they did.

Overall, our theory of brand names in politics did appear to hold true. Knowledge about branding has been imperative to consumer researchers, public relation directors, and advertisers for decades and might even seem to be intuitive for politics as well. We tested our hypotheses through survey research and statistical methods to affirm the name of a politician, and the connotation that goes along with it, will affect how their constituents view their policies, decisions, ideas, and so on. Officeholders as well as councils, administrations, and other governing bodies should make note of this as they pursue new initiatives to whatever public they may be serving.

REFERENCES
Appendix A

1. Blue form
   a. Question [E]
      i. "Do you favor or oppose a plan to build a new recreation center for Provo?"

2. White Form
   a. Question [E]
      i. "Do you favor or oppose a plan to build a new recreation center for Provo as supported by Mayor Billings?"
   b. Question [L] part c
      i. "Building iProvo was a good idea."
   c. Question [P]
      i. "Thinking back on Lewis K. Billings' service as mayor, what grade would you give him?"

Appendix B

I. In order to examine the effects of the inclusion of Mayor Billings' name, we decided to use a t-test to compare the means of each question on both forms in relation to the support of building a new recreation center. We chose to use a comparison of means test because we believed that there could be a statistically significant difference between the results on the two forms since there was variation in question wording. The scale that was used to measure support for the recreation center was an approval scale of five options, from strongly approve to strongly oppose. These responses were coded from 1 to 5, respectively. Before we ran the statistical tests, we dropped any non-responses in relation to the questions that we were examining. In so doing, we felt that the data collected would be more accurate as to the general feelings of the public concerning support of the recreation center in relation to the presence of Mayor Billings' name. The superficial examination of the results showed that the inclusion of Mayor Billings' name when suggesting the building of a new recreation center fostered lower support for the public work as opposed to when his name was not included. The statistical significance of the test supported our assumptions. The outputs that we examined to determine statistical significance were the t-statistic and the p-value of the test. The t-statistic that was produced in our model was 2.89, and the p-value produced was 0.04. Both of these figures suggest that there is a statistically significant relationship between the two means of the forms examined. This means that those that received the form which included Mayor Billings' name were less supportive of the construction of a new recreation center. The finding of our analysis suggests that the reputation of a politician to the general public can have an influence on the support of a public work.

II. In order to interpret the results on a micro level as opposed to a macro level, we put the data into a linear regression model to examine the coefficient. A linear
regression model allows us to determine an individual’s likelihood of supporting the building of the recreation center and to what extent they will be swayed by the change in question wording. We first examined the information in relation to the color of the forms used that differed between the form that used Mayor Billings' name in the question and the form that did not. We changed the variables from 1 and 2 representing colors to 0 and 1 to make the variable binary. We did this to ensure ease in interpreting the data produced by the regression. The forms labeled 0 were the forms that included Mayor Billings' name on the question, and the forms labeled 1 were forms that did not include his name. The scale of support that was used in the regression was the same as was used in the t-test, with 1 representing those who strongly approved of the recreation center and 5 representing those who strongly opposed it. We then ran the regression with the dependent variable being the support for the recreation center and the independent variable being the color of the form. The results of the regression supported the results of the t-test. In examining the statistical significance of the regression, the p-value was 0.00 and the coefficient was -0.15. This suggests that with a one unit increase in the dependent variable (which in this case was the change from a form that did have Billings' name to a form that did not), created a response that was lower by 0.15 units.

III. We created binary variables for marital status, conservatism, college education, and party affiliation to create larger groupings and to make the distinction between one group and another more distinct. We feel that the binary variables gave us results that were easier to interpret than if we had left them as continuous variables.