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Honesty, integrity trump policies for people when it comes to presidential candidates

BYLINE: By RON FOURNIER

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For all the policy blueprints churned out by presidential campaigns, there is this indisputable fact: Americans care less about issues than they do about a candidate's character.

A new Associated Press-Ipsos poll says 55 percent of those surveyed consider honesty, integrity and other values of character the most important qualities they look for in a presidential candidate.

Just one-third look first to candidates' stances on issues; even fewer focus foremost on leadership traits, experience or intelligence.

"Voters only look at policies as a lens into what type of person the candidate is," said Ken Mehlman, chairman of President George W. Bush's 2004 re-election campaign. That campaign based its voter targeting and messaging strategies on the character-first theory.

The AP-Ipsos poll of 1,001 adults, conducted Monday through Wednesday, found honesty was by far the most popular single trait volunteered by 41 percent of voters in open-ended questioning.

The results might have been different had respondents been forced to choose between either issues or character. But this survey allowed people to volunteer any "qualities or characteristics," and a minority seized on issues.

The findings are consistent with an AP-Ipsos poll from September 2004, when 38 percent of voters chose honesty as the most important quality when picking a president. That was more than any other factor. At the time of that survey, a majority of voters found Bush to be honest.

But in an AP-AOL News poll conducted in January, only 44 percent said they thought Bush was honest.

His decline in the category of trust is widely attributed to the fallout from the Iraq war and Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The drop is most prominent among people 30 to 39, suburban women, married women with children and people with household incomes in the \$50,000 (euro38,000) to \$75,000 (euro57,000) bracket.

Bush's collapse in the character test should serve as a warning to the 2008 presidential candidates. Character matters, voters say, and they already are sizing up the field.

Among Republican and Republican-leaning voters, former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani leads Arizona Sen. John McCain 35 percent to 22 percent. Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich had 11 percent, followed in the single digits by former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee and Sen. Sam Brownback of Kansas.

Giuliani leads the pack among voters who look first to a candidate's character, issues and leadership qualities. The only area when McCain pulls even to Giuliani is among voters who cite experience as the most important quality or characteristic in a president.

Among Democrats, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton of New York leads with 38 percent, followed by Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois at 21 percent. Former Vice President Al Gore is at 14 percent and 2004 vice presidential nominee John Edwards is at 10 percent. The rest of the field is in single digits.

Clinton leads Obama among voters who mention honesty and strong character, compassion, intelligence and stance on issues. The former first lady is tied with Obama among the small number of respondents who value experience, a surprise given Obama's short stint in Washington.

Policies may not get candidates elected. But politicians can use their policies to connect with voters at a gut level.

Former President Bill Clinton's book-length economic blueprint showed voters he would work hard to tackle problems they cared about. His empathy was a winning trait in 1992.

Bush won re-election in 2004 when most people were opposed to the war in Iraq. He used the against-the-grain war policy to cast himself as a strong, decisive leader. It worked until voters started doubting his honesty and competence in 2005.

"Modern day presidential campaigns are essentially character tests, with character broadly defined to encompass a mosaic of traits looks, likability, vision, philosophy, ideology, biography, communications skills, intelligence, strength, optimism, empathy, ethics, values, among others," said Democratic strategist Chris Lehane of California.

Steffen Schmidt, political science professor at Iowa State University, said the 2008 field faces many challenges in the character contest. The top half-dozen or so candidates have had their honesty or integrity called into question already, including relative newcomer Obama.

"The problem is it's almost impossible to find a human being who lives up to the expectations of voters. Everyone has things they've done that they're not proud of," Schmidt said. "Nobody's character is perfect."

The poll had a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 3 percentage points. For Democrats and Republicans, it was 4.5 percentage points.

AP news survey specialist Dennis Junius contributed to this report.

On the Net:

Ipsos: <http://www.ap-ipsosresults.com>

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