

**AMERICAN SENTIMENTS ON PERCEIVED BEHAVIORAL & COGNITIVE  
QUALIFICATIONS WITHIN PUBLIC OFFICIALS**

by

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## ABSTRACT

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With the increasing polarization of dialogue in the American political atmosphere, public sentiment has progressively become indispensable to U.S. governmental affairs; bearing heightened importance for continued interdisciplinary study in Psychology & Political Science. With the rise in political engagement, there have been growing concerns about the behavioral and cognitive qualifications of government officials, especially officials who are elected to hold public office. This research examines Americans' attitudes toward the likeliness of public officials' conduct to be a factor in vote choice. Correspondingly, by expanding the umbrella of Political Psychology to explore perceptions of the behavioral sciences - this study also examines Americans' viewpoint for the disqualification of public officials due to cognitive decline.

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## INTRODUCTION

An increasing number of attacks and allegations questioning the mental fitness of candidates were highly prorogated during recent election seasons (Phillips 1-26); through this and as derived from Mental Health America (MHA), mental health and acuity is an emerging topic of the U.S. political landscape in the status quo, especially with the renewed interested and concern about the behavior, conduct, and cognitive abilities of individuals seeking public office. Furthermore, through this continued public interest, there have also been various new proposals for the application of psychological testing. (Krosnick 49-72) Seeing the crossover between the disciplines of Psychology and Political Science in terms of taking a psychological and “human” approach to gauging the U.S. political landscape, i.e., Political Psychology, served as a fundamental component of this study.

This research was designed through a public opinion polling model with two questions, (I) does there exist a statistically significant difference between an individual’s party affiliation and whether those individuals base their vote on the conduct of public officials, and (II) does there exist a statistically significant difference between the age of an individual and whether those individuals believe that a public official should be disqualified from holding office due to signs of cognitive decline. Utilizing the aforementioned questions, the research was designed with the following hypotheses:

Question One (I)

$H_0$ : There is no statistically significant difference between a respondent’s party affiliation and whether they base their vote on the conduct of public officials.

$H_1$ : There is a statistically significant difference between a respondent's party affiliation and whether they base their vote on the conduct of public officials.

Question Two (II)

$H_0$ : There is no statistically significant difference between the age of a respondent and whether they believe a public official should be disqualified from holding office due to signs of cognitive decline.

$H_1$ : There is a statistically significant difference between the age of a respondent and whether they believe a public official should be disqualified from holding office due to signs of cognitive decline.

As such, by using a public opinion polling model for this research, this study was enabled to emphasize the idea of using Political Psychology to better examine sentiments on public policy and therefore directly measure public opinion.

Taking into consideration the two hypotheses within this one study, this paper is outlined by initially providing the Methodology, which encompasses both questions collectively. The Results & Discussion are then separated by question, beginning with an overview examination of each question, and its demographic cross-tabulation analyses and discussion following thereafter. Lastly, the Conclusion and References are subsequently provided, once again, encompassing both questions collectively.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To assess the opinion of individuals, both above-referenced questions were reworded into an interrogative format with limited answer choices and were consequently entered as online

surveys into *Amazon Mechanical Turk*, a crowdsourcing work website from Amazon, Inc. Due to the use of specific terminology within the questions, all respondents were provided with background information at the time of the survey.

With the background explanation that, for the purposes of this research, “behavior” was defined as “how a person conducts themselves”, Question One (I) was posed to respondents as “How likely or unlikely is the behavior (conduct) of a public official to affect the way you cast your vote?” The Respondents were subsequently given answer choices on a scale from “very likely” to “very unlikely”, i.e., “very likely”, “likely”, “unsure/undecided”, “unlikely”, and “very unlikely”.

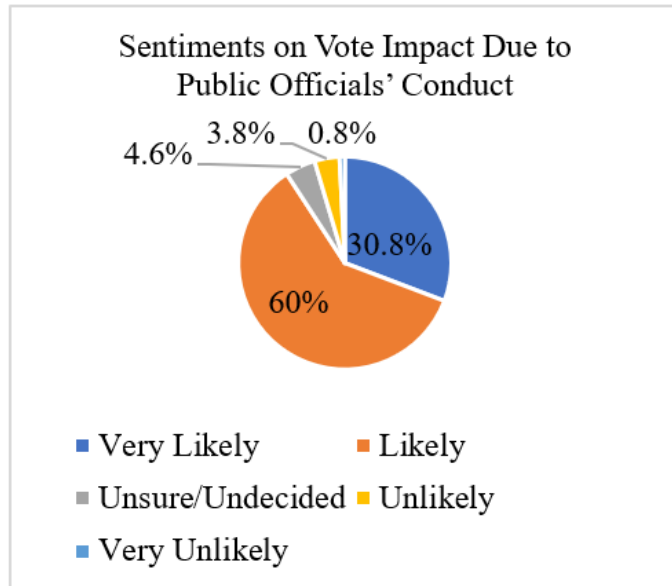
With the background explanation that, for the purposes of this research, “cognitive decline” was defined as “having trouble remembering, understanding, or concentrating on ideas/information”, Question Two (II) was posed to respondents as, “If an elected official shows abundantly obvious signs of cognitive decline, should they or should they not become disqualified from public office?” The Respondents were subsequently given the answer choices of “yes, they should be disqualified”, “no, they should not be disqualified”, and “unsure/undecided”.

Respondents were also asked to self-identify with their age bracket (i.e., “18-34 years of age”, “35-54 years of age”, “55-64 years of age”, “65 and over”) and party affiliation (i.e., “Democrat”, “Republican”, “Independent/Other Party”, “Not Registered”). Once the survey had surpassed its allocated timeframe and was closed, the poll demonstrated that the data collected was from one-hundred and thirty (130) random individuals within the United States over the age of eighteen (18). Utilizing the IBM-produced software *Statistical Package for the Social*

Sciences (SPSS), the data was then analyzed and cross-tabulated by age brackets and party affiliation.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION OF QUESTION ONE (I)

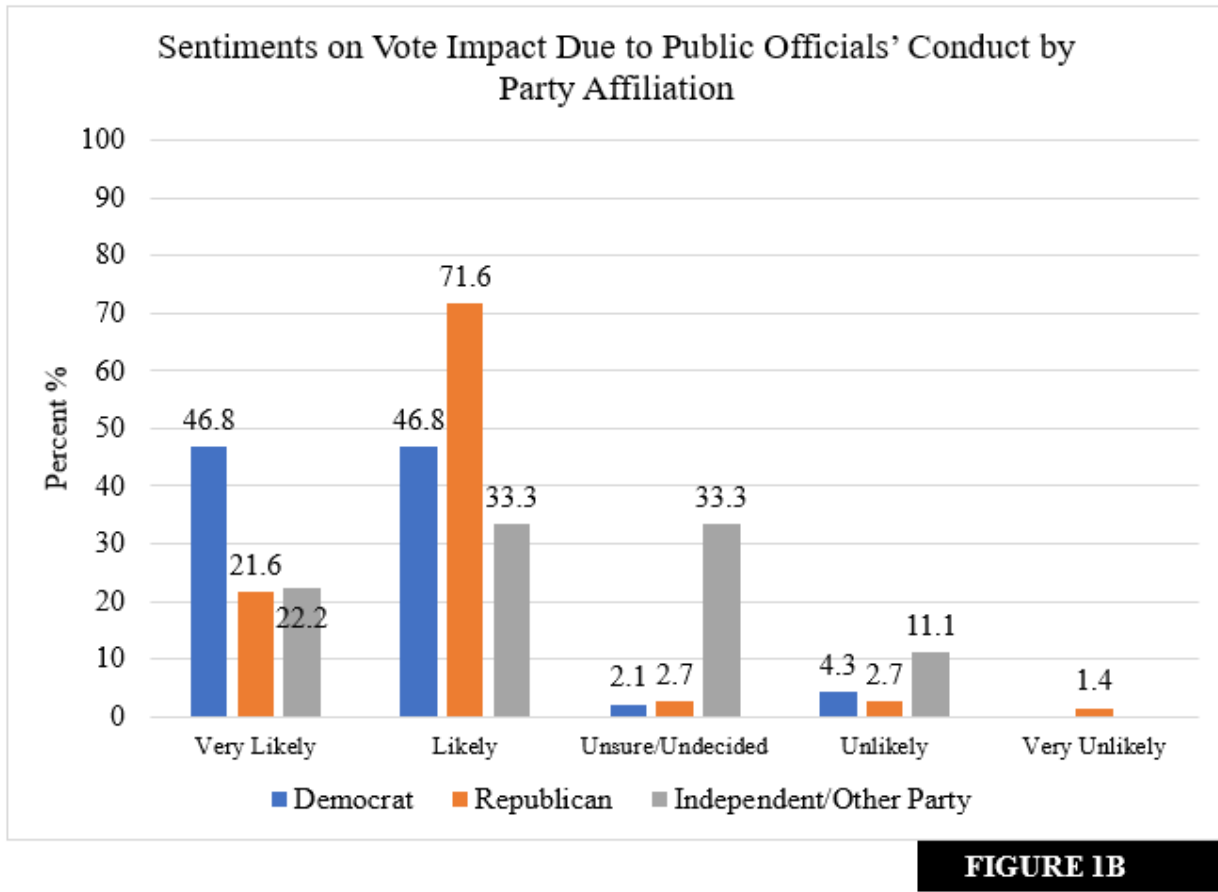
Overall, and as demonstrated in Figure 1A, 30.8% of respondents believed their vote is very likely to be impacted based on the conduct of public officials, 60% of respondents believed that it was likely, 3.8% of respondents believed that it was unlikely, 0.8% of respondents believed that it was very unlikely, and 4.6% of respondents were unsure or undecided.



**FIGURE 1A**

Utilizing the SPSS software, the data was then cross-tabulated by party affiliation and reanalyzed. As demonstrated in figure 1B, 46.8% of respondents who identified as Democrat, 21.6% of respondents who identified as Republican, and 22.2% of respondents who identified as Independent/Other Party, chose that it was “very likely” to impact their vote; 46.8% of respondents who identified as Democrat, 71.6% of respondents who identified as Republican, and 33.3% of respondents who identified as Independent/Other Party, chose that it was “likely” to impact their vote; 4.3% of respondents who identified as Democrat, 2.7% of respondents who identified as Republican, and 11.1% of respondents who identified as Independent/Other Party, chose that it was “unlikely” to impact their vote; 1.4% of respondents who identified as Republican chose that it was “very unlikely” to impact their vote; and, 2.1% of respondents who

identified as Democrat, 2.7% of respondents who identified as Republican, and 33.3% of respondents who identified as Independent/Other Party, chose that they were “unsure/undecided” on how public officials’ behavior (conduct) would impact their vote.



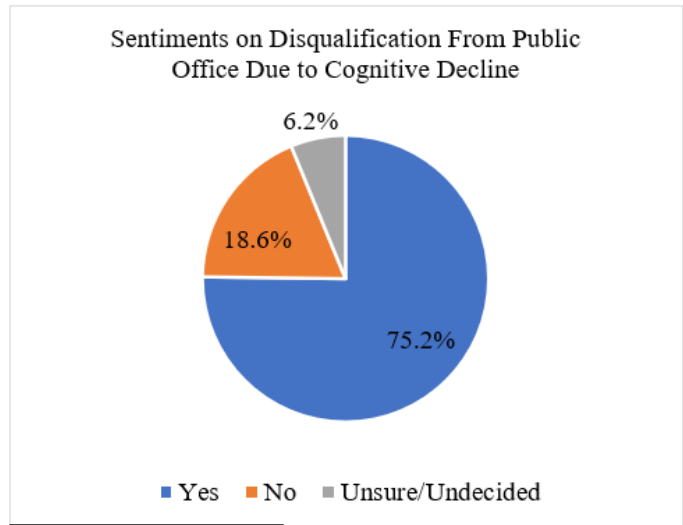
Employing the statistical test, “Pearson’s Chi-Square Test”, this study demonstrated that there is a statically significant difference at the 5% significance level ( $\chi^2(12) = 29.81, p < 0.05$ ) between individuals’ party affiliation and how likely the conduct of public officials affects the way a respondent may cast their vote, thus rejecting the null hypothesis of Question One (I). Moreover, Figure 1B corroborates that respondents who identified as Democrats are more likely to consider vote impact due to public official’s behavior (conduct) as a certainty, i.e., “more



likely”), whereas respondents who identified as Republicans are more likely to consider vote impact due to public official’s behavior (conduct) as a probability, i.e., “likely”

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION OF QUESTION TWO (II)

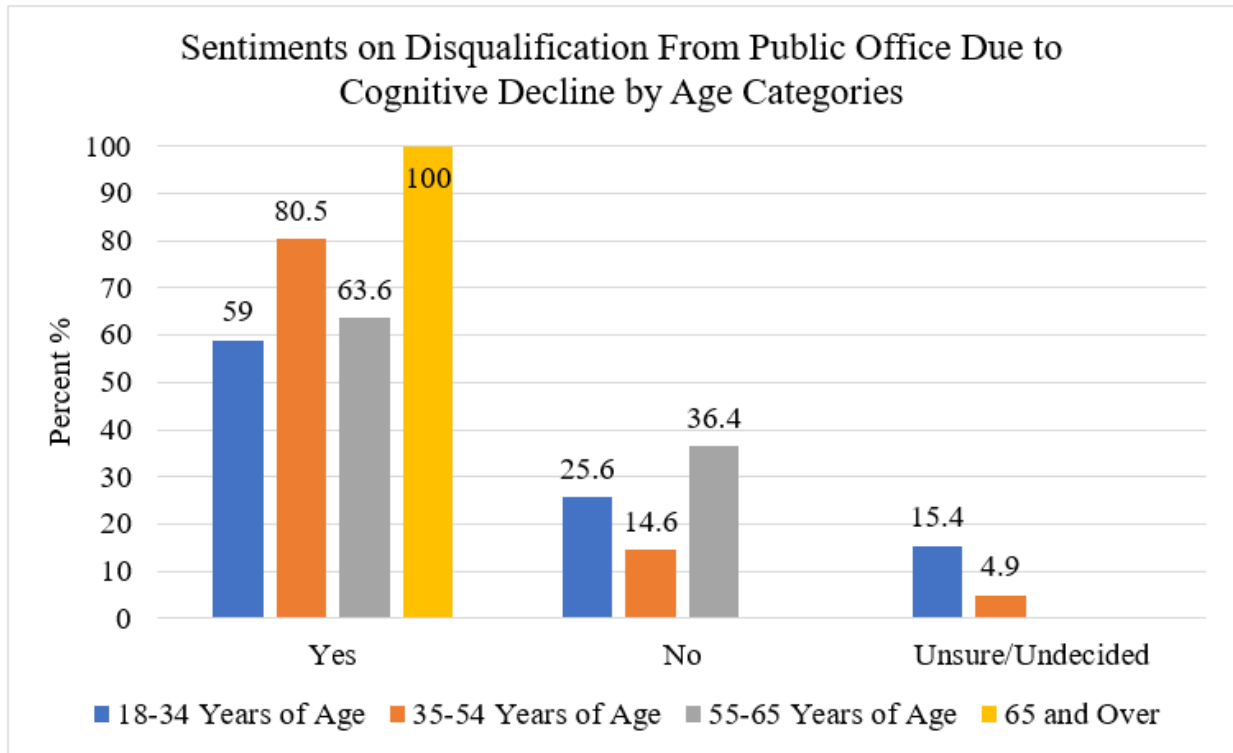
Overall, and as demonstrated in Figure 2A, 75.2% of respondents believe that if an elected official shows obvious signs of cognitive decline, then they should be disqualified from public office, 18.6% of respondents disagreed, believing that elected officials should not be disqualified from office, and 6.2% of respondents were unsure or undecided.



**FIGURE 2A**

Using the SPSS software, the data was then cross-tabulated by age bracket and reanalyzed. As demonstrated in Figure 2B, 59% of respondents within the “18-34 years of age” bracket, 80.5% of respondents within the “35-54 years of age” bracket, 63.6% of respondents within the “55-65 years of age” bracket, and 100% of the “65 and over” age bracket chose that “yes, they should be disqualified”; 25.6% of respondents within the “18-34 years of age” bracket, 14.6% of respondents within the “35-54 years of age” bracket, 36.4% of respondents within the “55-65 years of age”, chose that “no, they should not be disqualified”; 15.4% of respondents within the “18-34 years of age” bracket, 4.9% of respondents within the “35-54 years of age” bracket, chose that they were “unsure/undecided” on whether a public official should or should not be disqualified due to cognitive decline. This research notes the irregularity of having a “100%” value which is demonstrated in Figure 2B in the “65 and Over” age bracket

– through further analysis, the data was verified, and it was determined that all twenty-eight (28) of the respondents within the “65 and Over” age bracket chose that “yes, they should be disqualified”; this research further acknowledges that this irregularity was caused by the study’s limited sample size and does not represent the actuality in a non-statistical application.



**FIGURE 2B**

Employing the statistical test, “Pearson’s Chi-Square Test”, this study demonstrated that there is a statically significant difference at the 1% significance level ( $\chi^2(6) = 23.18, p < 0.01$ ) between age groups and respondents' beliefs on whether an elected official, with abundantly obvious signs of cognitive decline, should or should not be disqualified from public office, thus rejecting the null hypothesis of Question Two (II). Moreover, Figure 2B corroborates that respondents who identified in the younger age brackets were more varied and open on their stance of disqualification from public office due to cognitive decline.

## CONCLUSION

Through this study's examination of public opinion, this research was able to successfully reject both the null hypothesis of Question One (I) and Question Two (II). As such, this study demonstrates that there is a statistically significant difference between a respondent's party and how their vote is impacted based on the behavior (conduct) of public officials. Furthermore, this study also demonstrates that there is a statically significant difference between the age of a respondent and whether they believe a public official should be disqualified from holding office due to cognitive decline.

As expressed from the data in Figure 1A and Figure 1B, the prevailing overall sentiment is that there exists current public concern and awareness pertaining to the conduct and cognitive abilities of public officials. In the status quo, as derived from public information from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), numerous federal agencies already require various types of behavioral and cognitive testing for their officers and employees, including but not limited to the FBI; with the rising societal interest in mental health and acuity, this study serves not only as an indication of the necessity of interdisciplinary study between political science and psychology but also serves as an additional benchmark for comparison as to the future implications and public opinion brought about by implementing psychological testing for public officials.

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## APPENDIX A: SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Q: What is your sex?

- (1) Male
- (2) Female

Q: What is your age?

- (1) Under 18
- (2) 18-34 years
- (3) 35-54 years
- (4) 55-64 years
- (5) 65 and over

Q: If an elected official shows abundantly obvious signs of cognitive decline, should they or should they not become disqualified from public office?

- (1) Yes, they should be disqualified
- (2) No, there should not be disqualified
- (3) Unsure/Undecided

Q: How likely or unlikely is the behavior (how a public official conducts themselves) to affect the way you cast your vote?

- (1) Very Likely
- (2) Likely
- (3) Unsure/Undecided
- (4) Unlikely
- (5) Very Unlikely

Q: What is your party affiliation?

- (1) Democrat
- (2) Republican
- (3) Independent/Other Party
- (4) Not Registered