Age Differences in Individualistic Language Influence Judgments of Electability and Performance
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INTRODUCTION
- Ageism has negative implications for social interactions and hiring decisions (Levy, 2003, 2009).
- Older adults (OA) are judged as highly warm but lacking in competence per the Stereotype Content Model (SCM; Fiske et al., 2002).
- Individuals who emphasize collectivistic language (e.g., “we”) are more likely to be elected than candidates who emphasize individualistic language (e.g., “I”; Steffens & Haslam, 2013).
- OA use more collectivistic and group-based language compared to young adults (YA) when presenting themselves for social judgments (e.g., dating profiles; Davis & Fingerman, 2015).

Present Study
Extend age differences in collectivistic and individualistic language to judgments of performance and electability.

Hypotheses
1. OA will use more affiliative (i.e., group-based), positive affect, and first-person plural (i.e., “we”); collectivistic language compared to YA; while YA will use more first-person singular (i.e., “I”; individualistic) language than OA.
2. More collectivistic language will be positively associated with electability and performance outcomes, while greater use of individualistic language will be negatively associated with these outcomes.

METHODS
Procedure
- Speeches from 180 participants were transcribed and analyzed using the Linguistic and Inquiry Word Count Software (LIWC; Pennebaker et al., 2015). See Table 1 for demographic information.
- YA and OA were videotaped presenting 5-minute impromptu speeches as part of a larger study in the style of the Trier Social Stress Test (TST; Kirschbaum et al., 1993).
- Participants selected the role they wished to campaign for (e.g., head of a sports team, U.S. Senator, role in a church organization).
- Range of spoken words varied during the 5 minutes (162 – 1141 words), but no age or gender differences emerged.

Seven language categories were examined:
- First-Person Singular: I, me, my
- First-Person Plural: We, us, our
- Positive Affect: Happy, pretty, nice
- Negative Affect: Hate, afraid, cry
- Affiliative: Together, group, friend
- Achievement: Award, goal, win
- Power: Strong, control, chief

Analyses & Results
Hypothesis 1
- Three one-way MANCOVAs found significant age differences in (1) plural (“we”) and singular pronouns (“I”), (2) positive and negative affect, and (3) affiliative, power, and achievement language—controlling for gender. See Figure 1 for all word category proportions.
- Supporting H1, OA used greater “we”-language than YA: F(1, 177) = 6.48, p < .05, r² = .04. YA used more “I”-language than OA: F(1, 177) = 8.48, p < .01, r² = .05.
- Refuting H1, no age differences emerged on affiliative language, p = .428. YA used more achievement and power language than OA, t(178) = 3.09, p < .01, d = .46 and t(178) = 3.39, p < .01, d = .42, respectively.

Hypothesis 2
- The more “I” language that was used during the speech, the less electable the candidate was judged (r = -.27, p < .001) and the lower their ratings of performance (r = -.31, p < .001); “We”-language did not show this relationship (r = .04 and r = .11, respectively; ps > .10).
- These results were found to be age-invariant; see Table 2.
- We found significant relationships between (1) age and performance and (2) age and electability through the mediator of individualistic language (ps < .01); see Figure 2.
- These relationships were not found for collectivistic language.

Results
- Electability [Electability Item: Should this candidate be elected to the position for which they were campaigning? (1 = no, 2 = maybe, 3 = yes)].
- Positive relationship (r = .11, p = .04, d = .04).
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- Positive relationship (r = .11, p = .04, d = .04).

DISCUSSION
- We replicated previous results of age-related differences in language endorsement (“I” vs. “we”).
- We did not find evidence that collectivistic language positively influenced electability and performance judgments. Instead, it appears that individualistic language leads to lower judgments of performance and electability overall. Importantly, this effect was age-invariant.
- In the SCM, OA are judged less competent than YA. Our results suggest that this stereotype is not related to language differences in usage of collectivistic language. Instead, OA are preferred over YA because they use less “I”-language when campaigning.
- These results suggest that all speakers can benefit from minimizing “I”-statements to enhance positive perceptions.