

## Looking good for election day: do attractive candidates do better?

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**W**e use first impressions every day to judge the people we encounter. Often based largely or solely on someone's appearance, these snap judgements help us to determine who we consider competent or trustworthy. As a result, first impressions tend to predict a wide range of behaviours. Attractiveness, in particular, is a powerful attribute. Teachers who are perceived to be more attractive receive more positive student evaluations, even when the teachers are evaluated using only short video clips with no sound. Similarly, attractive university professors tend to receive evaluations that are, on average, nearly a point higher on a five-point scale. Attractive individuals are more likely to receive assistance from strangers, and attractive children tend to receive more attention from adults. Attractiveness also conveys a variety of benefits in business: individuals who are perceived to be attractive are more likely to be hired and promoted, and they tend to receive higher incomes.

Such superficial judgements should, of course, play no role in politics. Except that there is considerable evidence that they do. In a famous study from the United States, Todorov and his colleagues

showed that US congressional candidates who were judged more competent in the laboratory (based on as little as thirty-three milliseconds of exposure to photos) were the real election winners about 70 per cent of the time. The effect of appearance is by no means limited to the US; studies document the relationship between appearance and election results in countries around the world. Indeed, the effect of appearance is so significant that one recent study was able to predict French election results using the judgements that Swiss children made from looking at photos of the candidates.

There are many things we might infer about political candidates based on their appearance. Do they appear to be competent? Do they appear to be honest or caring? All of these are traits that people value in their political leaders. However, unlike these traits, attractiveness conveys no meaningful information about a candidate's ability to represent his or her constituents. And yet studies document a relationship between perceptions of attractiveness and electoral success in Australia, Brazil, Canada, Finland, Germany, Mexico and Switzerland. British elections are no exception. Attractiveness has been shown to give an edge in races where the candidates were members of the opposite sex. Women, in particular, are more likely to prefer an attractive candidate. Attractiveness is also a predictor of success in local elections where voters tend to care less about the outcome.

One recent study of the 2010 British general election asked undergraduates from an American university to evaluate real British candidates using quickly formed first impressions of a photograph of the candidate's face. To minimise the differences between the photographs, all 150 photographs featured candidates facing forward, all the photographs and faces were roughly the same size and resolution, and all the candidates were smiling. The photographs were paired according to actual electoral races in which the candidates ran against each other. The students were shown two images for each election, of

the winner and the second place candidate, with each picture being shown one at a time for less than one second each. Participants had thirty seconds to decide which candidate they thought was the more attractive of the pair.

There were many races where the students had a clear preference on which candidate was more attractive. Conservative candidates were rated as being more attractive 58 per cent of the time, compared with 41 per cent for Labour candidates and 49 per cent for Liberal Democrat candidates. In addition, students were less likely to find incumbent MPs attractive. These differences may be due to the age of the candidates, as the incumbents tend to be older than the challengers, and in general the study did find that students tended to rate younger candidates as being more attractive; candidates younger than forty years old were, on average, rated as being the more attractive of the pair by 59 per cent of participants, while the percentage dropped to 34 per cent for candidates older than sixty. This is perhaps unsurprising given that the average age of the students was only twenty years.

More surprisingly, however, these perceptions of attractiveness predicted 58 per cent of these election contests. And in close races – those decided by less than 5 per cent of the votes – attractiveness successfully predicted the outcomes of almost three-quarters (72 per cent) of the elections. Remember that this was using only American students' judgements about the candidates' attractiveness, so the accuracy of this prediction is particularly surprising, as they were unlikely to know anything else about the politicians they were rating.

What exactly is the payoff of being deemed the more attractive candidate? To find this out, the authors calculated the difference in the percentage of votes received by a candidate who was rated as being attractive by 25 per cent of students versus a candidate who is rated as being more attractive by 75 per cent of the students. They found that the more attractive candidate was predicted to have more than

a 2 percentage point advantage over their less attractive opponent, even after taking into account the candidate's party and their party's vote share in the constituency in the previous election, as well as the candidate's campaign spending, gender, age, and whether they were an incumbent MP. In the grand scheme of things, 2 percentage points might not seem like much. But consider that approximately thirty constituencies were decided by less than 2 per cent of votes in 2010, and also that the Conservative Party needed just twenty additional seats to gain a majority in parliament. All of a sudden a difference of 2 percentage points does not seem so small.

### FURTHER READING

More information about the findings and the study presented here can be found in Kyle Mattes and Caitlin Milazzo's 'Pretty Faces, Marginal Races: Predicting Election Outcomes Using Positive and Negative Trait Assessments of British Parliamentary Candidate Images' (*Electoral Studies*, 2014). The methodology used in this study was first developed by Alexander Todorov et al. – see 'Inferences of Competence from Faces Predict Election Outcomes' (*Science*, 2005) – who used rapidly determined first impressions of candidate competence to explain US Congressional outcomes. For information on the role of first impressions, see 'Very First Impressions' by Moshe Bar et al. (*Emotion*, 2006) and Ingrid R. Olson and Christy Marshuetz's 'Facial Attractiveness is Appraised in a Glance' (*Emotion*, 2005). There are also a number of other interesting studies about the role of candidate traits in British elections, including 'Ballot Photographs as Cues in Low-Information Elections' by Susan Banducci et al. (*Political Psychology*, 2008), and a series of papers by Mark Shephard and Rob Johns, including their 'Facing the Voters: The Potential Impact of Ballot Paper Photographs' (*Political Studies*, 2011).