

MIND

The Look of a Winner

The emerging--and disturbing--science of how candidates' physical appearances influence our choice in leaders

By Christopher Olivola, Alexander Todorov on May 5, 2009



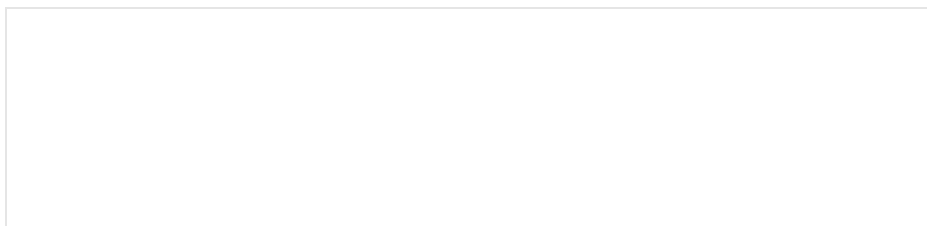


Credit: Elena Sayapina/istockphoto

When we walk into a voting booth and cast our vote, we like to think that we are making a considered decision, based on the issues. After all, a properly functioning democratic system, which gives its citizens the power to choose their leaders and shape critical policies, requires that voters are, for the most part, rational and that society can trust them to make sound judgments.

Perhaps partly for this reason, choosing competent leaders is considered too important to be left to minors, which is why most democracies only allow their adult citizens to vote. You wouldn't think, therefore, that a group of children would be able to predict the outcome of elections in another country, based only on photos of the candidates.

And yet, this is exactly what a recent study in the journal *Science* has found. The study, conducted by psychologists John Antonakis and Olaf Dalgas at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland, shows that Swiss children as young as five years can predict which candidates are more likely to win French parliamentary elections.



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This finding contributes to a large and growing body of evidence, coming from many research groups, which shows that voters seem to be heavily influenced by a candidate's appearance, and in particular the kinds of personality traits that a politician's face projects. This result is strange considering the political stakes. We may agree that one candidate *looks* more approachable or intelligent than another, but why do we then allow these superficial impressions to guide our political preferences?

The field of cognitive psychology teaches us that, when faced with a data deluge, the human mind tends to simplify the decision-making process by relying on quick and easy strategies, or what many scientists refer to as "heuristics." Given the complexity of voting—candidates hold many, subtle positions, and voters are bombarded with information—it should come as no surprise that voters take mental shortcuts to arrive at their final decisions. Although some of these strategies, such as voting along party lines, may be reasonable, others are harder to justify, and thus call into question the very notion of the rational voter.

The Wisdom of Under-Age Crowds

Consider a pair of photos. (Click on "next" above, just under the image at the beginning of the post.) Which of these two men appears more competent to you? If you think that the person on the right looks more competent, then you are in agreement with most respondents. These kinds of impressions from facial appearance can be formed after as little as one tenth of a second exposure to faces. Moreover, they can affect important social outcomes ranging from criminal sentencing to electoral success. The two men pictured were,

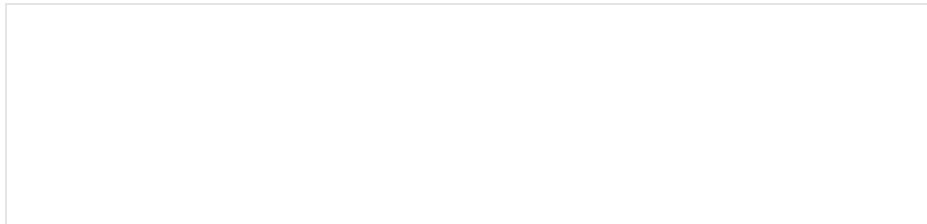
in fact, the leading candidates in a French parliamentary election and the one deemed more competent-looking actually won the election. Of course, it could be that in this particular race the winner happened to look more competent. A number of recent studies, however, have shown that rapid judgments about the personality traits of political candidates, based only on their facial appearance, predict electoral success well above chance.

These results have been obtained for U.S. Senate and gubernatorial elections, as well as elections in Australia, Finland, France, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand and the United Kingdom. In the case of gubernatorial and Senate elections, for example, the proportion of respondents who judged a candidate to be more competent-looking (than his or her rival) was positively related to that person's vote share. Further, the predictive power of these facial judgments is largely independent of candidate familiarity, gender, race, incumbency, attractiveness and age. This discovery suggests that voters rely heavily on facial appearance when choosing which candidate to elect, and in particular, on what these cues seem to indicate about leadership qualities.

The recent Science article reported by Antonakis and Dalgas is surprising and novel because it shows that even the judgments of young children can be used to accurately gauge a candidate's ability to garner votes. In the study, Swiss adults and children (aged 5 to 13 years) played a game simulating Odysseus' voyage from Troy to Ithaca, then indicated which person, from a pair of photos, they would choose to captain the boat on the difficult return trip. Unbeknownst to their participants, the photos actually showed pairs of rival candidates from the French parliamentary elections. (The

pair shown here is an example.)

Antonakis and Dalgas found that candidates who were judged by most Swiss participants to make better ship captains were more likely to win the actual French elections. Remarkably, the judgments of children and older participants were very similar; Swiss children predicted the French elections just as well as their adult counterparts. These findings are striking because they suggest that the judgments we form about political candidates from their facial appearances develop quite early and remain surprisingly stable, well into adulthood.



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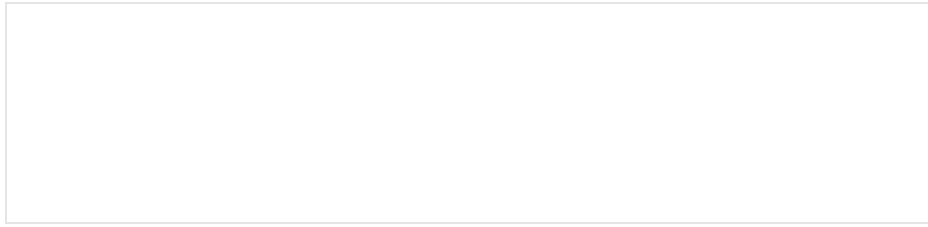
Faces are highly potent social stimuli and there are regions in the brain specialized in face processing. We use invariant facial features to track the identity of people over time and dynamic changes in the face such as expressions and eye gaze to understand the meaning of the situation. We also make a variety of personality inferences from faces, although the validity of such inferences is questionable. One explanation for the human proclivity to make such inferences is that these inferences are based on the resemblance of facial features to emotional expressions (for example, angry looking faces are perceived as untrustworthy) and other cues such as neonate features.

Although we would like to assume that voters are too sophisticated

and rational to be swayed by superficial cues, the research paints a much less flattering picture. Even when it comes to electing their leaders, it seems, people are heavily influenced by the images that these politicians project (even unwittingly). In particular, politicians with facial features that make them look like they possess strong leadership qualities seem to be at an advantage, at least among some voters. (Appearing like a leader seems to be tied up with perceived competence, and is different from appearing attractive.) Research by Gabriel Lenz and Chappell Lawson at MIT shows that candidate appearances have the strongest impact on voters who possess little political knowledge and spend a lot of time in front of their television screens.

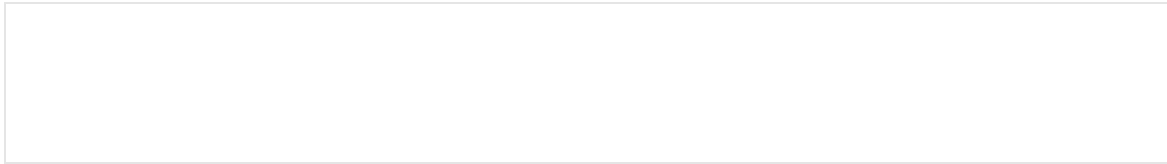
An important, and as yet unanswered, question concerns the accuracy of judgments based on facial appearances: Are competent-looking politicians actually more competent than their not-so-competent-looking rivals? Or, more broadly, can you tell something about a political candidate solely from his or her appearance? Play our Political Guessing Game to find out!

In this game you will be presented with photos of political candidates and asked to guess their political affiliation. Once you finish the game, you can find out how well you were able to distinguish Republicans and Democrats by their appearance. In addition, your participation will help answer important questions about the human ability to draw information from the faces of politicians.



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