Predicting political elections from rapid face judgments

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Basic findings

• People are extremely efficient at making trait judgments (e.g., competent, trustworthy) from faces

• Rapid, unreflective judgments of competence based solely on facial appearance predict election outcomes
Between 1772 and 1940 more than 150 editions

“the nearer the eyebrows are to the eyes, the more earnest, deep, and firm the character”

Choleric    Melancholic    Sanguine    Phlegmatic

Darwin was almost denied the chance to take the historic Beagle voyage on account of his nose. Apparently, the Captain [a fan of Lavater] did not believe that a person with such a nose would “possess sufficient energy and determination.”
“whether they are or are not sensible of it, all men [and women] are daily influenced by physiognomy”

Evaluating faces: Judging the book by its cover

- 100 ms exposure is sufficient for a variety of person judgments
  - Competence
  - Trustworthiness
  - Aggressiveness
  - Likeability

- Additional time exposure increases confidence in judgments

- Single glance impressions

Speed of inferences from faces

Trait judgments from faces

- Rapid
- Spontaneous
- Non-deliberative
- Requiring minimal attention
- Linked to neural systems underlying processing of emotionally significant stimuli

Should this matter for voting decisions?

- Not on many counts
  - From a rational perspective, candidate information should overwrite fleeting initial impressions
  - From an ideological perspective, party affiliation should sway such impressions
  - From a voter’s perspective, decisions are justified in terms of the candidate’s positions not their appearance

- Yet, our mental life is often guided by rapid, snap decisions that may not appear on the consciousness radar
Basic paradigm

• Participants are presented with the faces of the winner and the runner-up
  – Democratic and Republican candidates for prospective predictions (2004 & 2006)
• Political races with highly familiar politicians are excluded (e.g., Hillary Clinton)
• If a participant recognizes any of the faces, their judgments for this race are not included in the analysis

• All predictions are based on judgments of facial appearance and no other knowledge

Predicting Senate elections

Senate elections, 71.8% correctly predicted

Replications and extensions

- Judgments based on 10 s silent video clips of gubernatorial debates
  - D. Benjamin & J. Shapiro, Economics, Harvard
- Judgments of morphed faces of heads of state
  - A. Little et al., Psychology, University of Liverpool
- Judgments of competence from faces of Mexican politicians
  - C. Lawson & G. Lenz, Political Science, MIT
Automaticity of competence judgments

Which person is more competent?

Predicting gubernatorial elections

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experimental condition</th>
<th>Correctly predicted races</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100 ms exposure</td>
<td>61.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>250 ms exposure</td>
<td>67.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response deadline (2 s)</td>
<td>65.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unlimited time</td>
<td>67.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberation</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ballew & Todorov (2007). PNAS.
Why competence?

• People think that this is the most important attribute for a politician

• Not an entirely irrational process

• Just looking in the wrong place for the right information

Effects are specific for competence
Is it really competence?

• Effect of perceived competence is not due to
  – Differences in ethnicity and gender of candidates
  – Age differences
  – Attractiveness
  – Face familiarity
• Not an effect of other judgments either
  – Trustworthiness does not predict outcomes
  – Likeability does not predict outcomes
  – Etc.

What about Presidential elections?

• Work by Little, Burriss, Jones, & Roberts (University of Liverpool)

• Using morphing technique to remove recognition effects

• Elections in UK, USA, Australia, and New Zealand
Little et al. (2007). Evolution and human behavior.
Simulated voting and competence judgments


Context dependence of decisions

• Importance of trait attributes can shift as a function of context
  – In war time, we value different attributes than in peace time

• Events defining times of voting can change the perceived importance of trait attributes
In a war situation, who would you vote for?

A  B

In a peace situation, who would you vote for?

A  B
Masculine
Dominant
Strong leader

Attractive
Likable
Forgiving
Intelligent

Little et al. (2007). Evolution and Human Behavior.

Difference between Bush and Kerry applied to novel face
How does it work in the real world

• Some caveats
  – Appearance is not all you need
  – Clearly one needs the backing of one of the major parties
  – Pre-selection of candidates

  – Most likely, impressions from appearance do not affect partisans and informed voters
Relevant evidence

• At the level of voting decision, perhaps implicitly affecting undecided voters
  – Evidence from Lawson & Lenz (MIT, Political Science)

• At the level of party (elite) decisions, perhaps affecting the choice of candidates and fund raising ability
  – Evidence from Atkinson, Enos, & Hill (UCLA, Political Science)

Conclusions

• Inferences of competence from faces predict election outcomes

• The inferences are fairly automatic

• The effect is highly specific for competence

• But perhaps “fitting the face to the context” is as important as having a competent appearance
Thank you!

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