Ballot Photographs as Cues in Low-Information Elections

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ABSTRACT: Voters are often faced with the task of choosing among unknown candidates in low information elections. In this paper we test how first impressions of candidates can influence election outcomes by examining a set of elections where candidate photographs were displayed on the ballot. We find that trait inferences based on facial appearance influence the outcomes of elections. We also find that these trait inferences can be based on physical characteristics of the candidates, such as age, race and ethnicity. Therefore, first impressions can be important determinants of election outcomes, especially in low information elections.

KEYWORDS: heuristics, first impressions, candidate appearance, low information elections

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Introduction

Normative democratic theory requires voters to be informed when choosing between candidates but this expectation runs counter to the empirical research that shows that voters tend to be ill informed about candidate and party positions on issues. Nevertheless, a large body of research has shown that voters can compensate for a lack of information by using cognitive shortcuts in make voting decisions. Cognitive heuristics are commonly used as a bridge between the realities of a grossly uninformed electorate and the demands of normative democratic theory: citizens can make reasonable decisions without being completely informed by relying on cues provided by the party affiliation of the candidate, elite endorsements, candidate viability, incumbency status and the appearance of the candidate. For example, Popkin has argued that the use of such heuristics leads to "low information rationality" (1991, for a contrary view see Bartels 1996, Lau & Redlawsk 2001). These types of shortcuts or heuristics are particularly prominent in low-information elections (McDermott 1997) and when the situation facing voters is complex (Lau & Redlawsk 2001).

While these studies contend that shortcuts enable citizens to make meaningful choices, another body of research demonstrates that these shortcuts can sometimes bias electoral outcomes and voter choice. For example, incumbents (Krebs 1998), male candidates (Smith & Fox 2001), white candidates (Terkildsen 1993, Sigelman et al. 1995) and physically attractive candidates (Sigelman et al. 1987) tend to have greater electoral success. In the absence of other information, voters may resort to cues such as these that lead to stereotyped perceptions of candidates. Male candidates are perceived as tough,

aggressive, self-confident and assertive, while their female counterparts are described as warm, compassionate, people-oriented, gentle, kind, passive, caring and sensitive (Huddy & Terkildsen 1993a, 1993b; Leeper 1991; Rosenwasser & Dean 1989). Gender and race are also used as a cue to infer issue positions and ideology as well, with women and black candidates being seen as more liberal (McDermott 1998).

Recent accounts of decision making in the "blink of an eye" suggest that snap judgements based on attractiveness are strong influences regardless of whether they provide meaningful cues or not (see, for example, Gladwell, 2005, pp. 72-98). Studies focusing on first impressions find that influential judgements about candidate characteristics can be based on facial appearances rather than just the race or sex of the candidate (Todorov, et al. 2005; see also Willis and Todorov 2006). In dual-process models of social cognition, these first impressions, along with heuristics and stereotypes, form what are considered easy or effortless judgements that are distinct from, but may influence, more deliberate, reflective judgements (see Chaiken and Trope 1999).

Studies of candidate appearance cues on voters have largely relied on experiments to test their influence. While experimental data can help establish the causal links between candidate appearance and voter evaluations, little is known about the actual influence of candidate appearance on election outcomes (for an exception see Todorov et al 2005). Rather than relying on experiments, we combine experimental inferences of candidate traits on actual electoral outcomes in the United Kingdom where photographs were used on ballot papers. Not only do photographs allow voters to form first impressions of candidates, but they also provide demographic cues, which may lead to a potential bias.

We investigate these questions using data collected from elections for community partnership boards that are part of the British government's urban regeneration program – New Deal for Communities (NDC). These NDC partnership board elections, often using innovative electoral arrangements, are low saliency, non-partisan races to elect members to community councils that are responsible for the distribution of funding for community development (Rallings et al. 2004; Rallings & Thrasher 2002). Voters in these elections were presented with ballots that presented a photograph of the candidate alongside his or her name. The use of photographs was viewed as an innovative way of improving the quality of elections by providing voters with more information about the candidates. One line of reasoning was that if voters could recognize candidates who were active in the community then they would be able to reward them accordingly. While these photographs might cue voters to recognize active members of the community, they also provide other information about candidates such as their gender, age and ethnicity. More importantly, if voters were seeing these candidates for the first time, first impressions could be enormously influential. We examine whether these first impressions from these photographs may have had an unintended consequence by producing a bias in electoral outcomes.

Candidate Appearance Cues

Two lines of research are particularly important regarding candidate appearance and electoral choices. First, research into the structure of political preferences has demonstrated that, outside of issue positions and party affiliation, candidate evaluations are an important element in voter decision making. In other words, if voters are favorably

disposed toward a candidate, they are more likely to vote for him or her. Second, these evaluations act as a running tally of likes, dislikes, issue positions and even stereotyped evaluations of the candidates. Importantly, these evaluations appear to be influenced also by the personal characteristics of candidates (Miller et al. 1986). Traits such as integrity, competence and trustworthiness are central to prototypical conceptions of the ideal politician (Sigel 1966; Hellweg 1979; Kinder et al. 1980; Wayne 1982; Miller et al. 1986; Brown et al.1988; Trent et al. 1993; Funk 1997).

Perceptions of the personal traits of candidates may be influenced by factors such as a candidate's experience or how the candidate communicates campaign messages. However, the assignment of these character traits to candidates is also based on non-verbal cues from candidates or appearances. In the literature on candidate stereotypes, there is ample evidence that a candidate's gender (Huddy & Terkildson 1993a), race (McDermott 1998) and physical attractiveness (Sigelman et al. 1987) can affect evaluations of a candidate's issue competencies, ideology, issue positions and electability. Candidate appearance cues should be a familiar tool to voters because citizens typically make judgments on the basis of personal appearances in daily social interactions to facilitate communication (see Haxby et al. 2000).

In general, physically attractive people are thought to possess more desirable personality traits translating into other advantages. For example, good-looking people earn more over their lifetimes (Hamermesh & Biddle 1994). In the electoral arena, physically attractive candidates may benefit if voters ascribe the attributes of an effective representative and legislator to them (Riggle et al. 1992, Rosenberg et al. 1986, Rosenberg et al. 1991). There is experimental evidence that suggests that physically

attractive candidates are advantaged (Sigelman et al. 1987) and that this characteristic matters most for women candidates (Schubert & Curran 2001). However, Sigelman et al. (1990) have shown that hair loss does not bias voters against candidates.

If appearances are important in the political arena, a photograph becomes a crucial means of communicating information that is important in the voter's decision-making process. A photograph conveys information about the gender, age, ethnicity and physical attractiveness of the candidate. This information, in turn, is used to form judgments about the candidates. In an experimental study of candidate appearance where subjects were simply presented with a photograph of hypothetical candidates, the researchers conclude, "a photograph provides voters with a clear image of the candidate's character and fitness for office and this, in turn, importantly influences the electoral choices they make" (Rosenberg, et al. 1986, p.119). Evaluations can also be influenced by whether the photograph is portrayed favorably or not (Barret and Barrington 200). In discussing the implications of their findings regarding the use of heuristics in voting decisions, Lau and Redlawsk write, "Party labels already are a common part of the ballot for many types of elections; why not a picture of each candidate as well?" (2001, p. 969).

A photograph on the ballot, however, may reveal candidate characteristics that provokes a stereotyped response which can have an influence on electoral outcomes. These biases tend to influence candidates of color more so than female candidates. All else being equal (e.g. incumbency status, fundraising, partisanship), female candidates do no worse in terms of the probability of electoral success than male candidates (Darcy, Welch & Clark 1990). The election of black candidates, on the other hand, is directly correlated with the proportion of blacks in the population of the electoral district (see, for

example, Lublin & Voss 2000) suggesting that white voters are unwilling to vote for black candidates (Jones & Clemons 1993, Reeves 1997, Terkildsen 1993). Therefore, in the absence of other information, race and or ethnicity may be a powerful cue for white voters particularly when stereotypes are automatically activated (e.g. by a photograph) and there is no motivation to suppress their influence on behavior (see Fazio and Towles-Schwen 1999). While this relationship has largely gone untested outside the context of the U.S., we might expect the same prejudice against candidates of color by white voters in other contexts.

Voter characteristics and the decision context also condition whether first impressions about candidate traits are used to form judgments or whether a more deliberative process is used. In the absence of other information, stereotypes and other judgements based on appearances can be influential (Riggle et al. 1992, 1997). When more information is available, reliance on this other information will depend on the complexity of the task. When comparing candidates, a more cognitively demanding task than making an absolute judgment on a single candidate, subjects will rely on appearance and partisan cues rather than information about issues positions (Riggle et al. 1992, see also Schubert and Curran 2001). The number of candidates being evaluated might also add complexity to the decision task. However, Lau & Redlawsk (2001) find that both sophisticated (ideology) and unsophisticated (appearance) cues are used if the complexity of the decision task is defined by the number of alternatives. Additionally, more sophisticated individuals tend to rely less on appearance cues and more on issues (Redlawsk and Lau 2006).

While we do not measure voter sophistication, we expect that first impressions will be particularly influential in the election context we study – a low salience, low information election to local boards. Our analysis proceeds in two parts. We first infer candidate traits based on respondent evaluations of pictures on the ballots. Based on the past research on candidate cues, we expect women and candidates of color to be evaluated more negatively. We then use the average trait evaluations to predict election success (see also Banducci et al. 2003). This method also follows that of Todorov et al. (2005) who examined how first impressions of U.S. congressional candidates influence electoral outcomes. They were able to correctly predict the winner in 70% of the contests based on which candidates, from a quick glance at their photograph, looked more competent.

Inferring Personality Traits from Photographs

We build on the previous survey and experimental research by testing how candidate appearance influences outcomes in low information elections using data from real elections. Our sample is based on NDC elections held in 2001-2002 where photographs appeared on the ballots. About half the candidates in these elections were chosen by Single Transferable Vote (STV) while the other half were chosen by Multi-Member Plurality (MMP).[1] In total, there were 20 ballots that featured 212 candidates. Our primary hypothesis is that candidates with a more favorable appearance will be more positively evaluated which will give them an electoral advantage.

In order to distinguish perceptions of physical attractiveness from perceived personality, we capture two types of first impressions: overall attractiveness of the

candidate and evaluations of personality traits. We first establish the overall impressions of candidates on attractiveness and trait evaluations through the use of a web survey administered to respondents recruited via the YouGOV webpage.[2] Our purpose was to replicate how voters in these elections might have judged the appearance of these candidates so that we can compare the first impressions of the candidate to their fate on election day. The 521 recruited respondents (all from Great Britain) were asked to evaluate the attractiveness and personality traits of 10 candidates that were randomly displayed (one candidate per page) from the total sample of 212 candidates.[3] All 212 candidates were rated for attractiveness and personality traits on a four point scale by, on average, 25 respondents.

The photographs were scanned from the ballots and placed on a single page with a single question displayed at a time. Other than the photograph and the name of the candidate, respondents were given no other information about the candidate. While some respondents in the pre-test suggested that it was impossible to rate candidates solely on the basis of looks, our procedure follows that of prior research (Riggle et al. 1992, see also Todorov et al. 2005). In order to encourage evaluations of the photographs, respondents were reminded at the beginning of the web survey instrument of the following: *It is important to remember that although people sometimes have very little information about candidates beyond seeing them in a picture, their perceptions of candidates can be surprisingly accurate* (see Riggle et al. 1992, 72).

In addition to candidate "attractiveness", respondents were asked to evaluate candidates on the following six personality traits: trustworthiness, shares the respondent's concerns, leadership, qualification, competence, and experience. The questions were

phrased: "Please tell me how well you believe each of the following descriptions fit this candidate." Possible responses were very well, somewhat well, not very well or not very well at all. These ratings from each respondent were then averaged across each candidate to create a score on each trait. Candidate attractiveness is most analogous to measures of candidate "beauty", which we expect to influence traits, while the other characteristics are measure evaluations of personality traits. (The average responses to the individual items are summarized in the Appendix.) In order to create a summary of the personality traits of candidates we create a composite measure of the six personality trait indicators (alpha = .95).[4]

These trait evaluations, based on responses to the web survey, are then combined with the vote totals from the elections and candidate level data coded from the ballots. Characteristics of the candidates, such as race, sex and age, have been coded from the ballots themselves and the election statements of candidates.[5] Age was assessed by candidate statements and forms an ordinal scale that ranges from 1 to 4. In the cases where no candidate statement was available or where the information was missing the age was estimated from the photograph. We use a simple dummy variable to compare white and nonwhites.[6] Given that the elections were held shortly after the September 11, 2001 terror attacks, Arabs and Muslims may have been subject to discrimination particularly those who could be easily identified. Therefore we also identify whether or not the candidate was wearing something covering his head in the photograph. About 8 percent of the candidates did not provide a photograph.[7] A dummy variable is used to control for whether the absence of a photograph has a negative impact.

There is some indication that ballot position is also used as a shortcut in elections (Darcy & McAllister 1990; Miller & Krosnick 1998; Koppel & Steen 2004, Rallings et al. 1998). Therefore we also control for the ballot position of the candidate. We also include a measure of competitiveness to control for the differences in the number of candidates appearing on the ballot and the number of available positions on the board. This measure is based on the ratio of the number of candidates to the number of positions (ie. district magnitude).

Our main dependent variable is the success of the candidates in the election contest. Because we are comparing outcomes across types of electoral systems, we need a comparable indicator of the election outcome for each candidate. Using the percent of the vote that each candidate received in the election is not workable given that only first preferences in the STV elections were recorded and the subsequent rankings of candidates were not. Therefore, as the outcome variable we use whether or not the candidate was elected. In both the STV and MMP elections this indicates the candidate crossed the necessary threshold of votes to win a seat on the community board.

Results

Table 1 shows the results of a model assessing the impact of attractiveness and other physical characteristics on trait evaluations. The results show that several characteristics of the candidates as well as the actual photograph influence the trait evaluations of the candidates. Attractiveness has a strong impact independent of other physical characteristics. It is not surprising that another influential variable is whether or

not the candidate actually had a photograph on the ballot. Candidates without a photograph receive significantly lower ratings than those candidates with a photograph.

Several personal characteristics also influence the average trait evaluations. Older candidates are likely to receive more positive evaluations while the sex of the candidate appears to have no impact. However when attractiveness is omitted from the model, female candidates receive more negative evaluations than male candidates.[8] Race/ethnicity is also a factor that appears to have an influence. Whites receive significantly higher evaluations on personality traits than nonwhites. Candidates who have something covering their head were also evaluated less positively than those without headwear. Overall the fit is good, with the model explaining 63 percent of the variance in trait evaluations.

(Table 1 here)

Table 2 shows how these trait evaluations influence electoral outcomes. In addition to the trait evaluations, we have also included the same candidate characteristics that affected trait evaluations, such as attractiveness and physical characteristics because they may exhibit direct effects on the electoral outcomes. As can be seen from Table 2, candidates that were rated more positively on traits in our web survey were significantly more likely to win. Moving from the lowest rating to the highest in the sample increases the candidate's probability of winning by over 70 percent. These effects are illustrated in Figure 1. These effects are independent of the other candidate characteristics in the model. Attractiveness is not a significant factor when controlling for trait evaluations. However when trait evaluations are omitted from the model, the coefficient for attractiveness triples in size and achieves significance at p<.01. This indicates that the

effect of attractiveness is mediated by the trait evaluations. Regardless of the model specification, the race and ethnicity of the candidate has a substantial impact on the likelihood of winning. Specifically, the probability of winning for white candidates is 38 percent greater than nonwhite candidates. Recall that whites were also more positively evaluated than nonwhites. When the average trait rating and attractiveness is removed from the model, the size of the coefficient for white candidates decreases somewhat but remains statistically significant. These results suggest that white candidates are advantaged in ways that are independent of trait evaluations.

(Table 2 and Figure 1 here)

The results also suggest that women are not significantly more likely to lose than male candidates. Even when trait ratings are dropped from the model, women are still as likely to win as men. In order to see whether the personality traits were more important for women candidates we tested an interaction between sex of the candidate and the average trait rating; this interaction was not significant and its inclusion did not alter the substantive conclusion that sex of the candidate did not influence the outcome.

While the coefficient for ballot position is negative it is not significant. In part the effects of ballot position are captured by the variable representing competition which takes into account the number of candidates appearing on the ballot. When this measure is omitted from the model, the effect of ballot position increases and achieves statistical significance.

We also tested whether candidate experience was a factor influencing electoral outcomes. We are only able to code candidate experience for a subset of candidates where candidate statements were included with the ballot paper (n=108). The results from

this model indicated that candidate experience has little effect on the fate of a candidate. This result may be due to the fact that voters in these low information elections are not likely to be exposed to the level of candidate experience either through candidate campaign material or through media coverage. Even with the reduced sample size, the same candidate and ballot cues significant in the other models are significant in this model and the size of the coefficient remains similar despite adding candidate experience suggesting that the effect of candidate cues are fairly robust in these low information elections.

Discussion

Previous studies have either relied entirely on experiments or, as in the case of Todorov et al. (2005), on "naïve" evaluations of candidates to predict past electoral outcomes. Our research design more closely approximates the decision task voters would have been faced with on the day of the election – choosing from a ballot paper with photographs of unknown candidates. First impressions can be a powerful predictor of election outcomes. What are the implications for accountability and democracy if voters are simply deciding elections on the basis of perceived competence rather than on demonstrated competence?

Although it has been argued that cognitive heuristics can help overcome the informational deficit apparent in democracies, our findings challenge the rationality of voters. Our findings show that candidate attractiveness as well as race influence snap judgments about personality traits. In turn, these personality traits are powerful predictors of election outcomes, particularly in the absence of other information. This seems to be a

rather shallow in a election where voters are expected maintain accountability of elected official through evaluations of their performance.   In other words, while we do show that these judgments play a role in the outcome of elections, we cannot show whether these are "correct" or reasonable decisions that are in line with preferences (Lau and Redlawsk 2001). Unless the traits that are inferred from a quick glance at a candidates face reflect the actual personality traits of the individual, these snap judgments open up the possibility for misjudgments and incorrect voting.

That electoral outcomes in low information elections may be biased toward attractive, white candidates may offend notions of democracy that suggest that candidates should compete fairly and on the basis of issues not appearance. Ballot photographs in these local elections were introduced as a way to help voters. In the case of the local elections under study here, voters who might otherwise not recall the name of a candidate may recognize a candidate who has been active in the community from their photograph. In addition, voters can make inferences from candidate characteristics about their ideological positions and compatibility. However, the use of ballot photographs, as our results suggest, may influence electoral outcomes in unintended ways.

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Endnotes

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[1] In STV elections, voters rank preferred candidates from 1 to n on a list where n is the district magnitude. In MMP elections, voters simply choose *n* candidates from a list where *n* is the district magnitude.

[2] The respondents ranged in age from 18 to 75 and 52 percent were women.

[3] Rosenberg et al. determined that each respondent could evaluate about 10 candidates comfortably (1986, 112). We follow on this recommendation and each respondent rated 10 randomly assigned candidates along a number of dimensions. Each candidate was presented on a separate screen with the traits displayed to the right of the picture.

[4] Todorov et al. (2005) find that there are two dimensions to the personality traits: competence is the best predictor of electoral success and can be differentiated from other characteristics such as likability and trust (p. 1624). We find no such differentiation in our responses. A factor analysis of all traits suggests they load onto a single dimension and no one trait performed remarkably better than the others at predicting outcomes in separate analyses.

[5] Candidate statements were provided on a voluntary basis. In some cases the candidate provided a brief biographical sketch and a statement about what goals they would pursue in office.

[6] We originally created four categories of race/ethnicity (white, Arab/Muslim, Indian/Pakistani, Afro-Caribbean/African). Overall there were no substantial differences between these four categories with the exception of those with Indian/Pakistani descent who received lower evaluations than whites.

[7] Despite the lack of photograph, respondents to the web survey were still asked to

evaluate candidates on the basis of the only information that would have been available

on the ballot – the candidate's name.

[8] Female candidates were seen as being more attractive than male candidates.

Table 1: Effects of Candidate Attractiveness on Personality Traits (OLS Coefficients)

	Coef.		Std. Error
Attractiveness	1.86	**	(0.17)
Female	0.01		(0.03)
Age	0.08	**	(0.01)
White	0.08	*	(0.03)
Headwear	-0.15	**	(0.05)
No photo	-0.41	**	(0.06)
Constant	1.26	**	(0.09)
Adj. R^2	0.63		
n	212		

**p<.01; *p<.05

Table 2: Effects of Personality Traits on Election Outcomes (Logit Coefficients)

	Coef.		Std. Error
Trait evaluations	1.75	*	(0.76)
Attractiveness	2.20		(2.46)
Female	-0.53		(0.38)
Age	-0.20		(0.17)
White	1.63	**	(0.40)
Ballot position	-0.03		(0.02)
Ratio of seats to candidates	2.69	*	(1.19)
Constant	-6.26	**	(1.48)
Nagelkerke Pseudo R^2	0.41		
n	212		

**p<.01; *p<.05

Figure 1: Impact of Trait Evaluations on the Likelihood of Winning
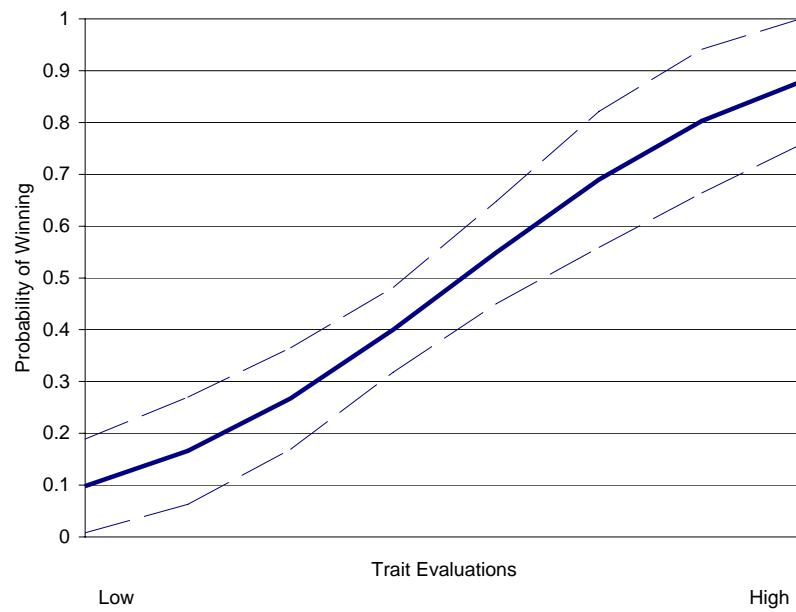
Note: Estimates derived from Table 2. Broken lines indicate 95 confidence levels.

Appendix Table 1: Summary Statistics for Candidates

		Min	Max
No photograph	8.0 %	0	1
Headwear	9.4 %	0	1
White	38.7 %	0	1
Female	37.7 %	0	1
Age	0.3	0	1
District magnitude	7.5	1	12
Ballot position	10.4	1	46

Appendix Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Attractiveness and Personality Traits

	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
Attractiveness	1.87	0.41	1.26	3.26
Trustworthy	2.35	0.42	1.43	3.29
Empathy	2.08	0.35	1.33	2.88
Leadership	2.20	0.35	1.33	3.15
Qualification	2.37	0.37	1.33	3.27
Competence	2.38	0.39	1.33	3.19
Experience	2.30	0.40	1.33	3.36