



## FlashReport

Appearance-based politics: Sex-typed facial cues communicate political party affiliation<sup>☆</sup>Colleen M. Carpinella<sup>\*</sup>, Kerri L. Johnson

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ We examine the influence of appearance-based cues on judgments of party affiliation.
- ▶ We find that facial cues associated with political party affiliation are sex-typed.
- ▶ Female Republicans are significantly more sex-typical than female Democrats.
- ▶ Accuracy of party judgments varies by sex-typicality and politician party.
- ▶ Facial sex-typicality mediates the influence of politician sex and party on perceiver party judgments.

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## ABSTRACT

Consequential political judgments often rely on facial appearance, yet the facial cues that compel such judgments remain unspecified. We predicted that judgments of political party affiliation, and by extension their accuracy, rely on the sex-typicality of facial cues (i.e., the degree of facial masculinity and femininity). In Study 1, we found that among Republicans/Conservatives in the 111th U.S. House of Representatives, women were significantly more sex-typical than men. This was not true for Democrats/Liberals. In Study 2, we examined the relationship between sex-typicality of facial cues and social judgments. We found that the accuracy of Republican categorizations was positively related to feminine cues in women but negatively related to masculine cues in men. In contrast, the opposite pattern was true for Democratic categorizations. Facial sex-typicality mediated the interaction between politician sex and party and perceiver party affiliation judgments. We discuss the implications that these findings have for electoral politics.

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## Introduction

Visual cues have a wide-spread impact on electoral decisions. From mere photographs, naive raters can identify election winners and losers (Antonakis & Dalgas, 2009; Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, & Hall, 2005). Judgments of competence account for 70% of the variance in U.S. election results (Atkinson, Enos, & Hill, 2009; Ballew & Todorov, 2007; Todorov et al., 2005), and such perceptions predict vote choice across cultures (e.g., Finland, Mexico, Brazil, United States, Japan; Berggren, Jordahl, & Poutvaara, 2011; Lawson, Lenz, Baker, & Myers, 2010; Rule et al., 2010). Moreover, observers can decipher the political party affiliation

of both unfamiliar elected officials and college students (Rule & Ambady, 2010), and, perceivers can identify the political ideology of unknown politicians from other countries (Bull & Hawkes, 1982; Samochowiec, Wänke, & Fiedler, 2010). Collectively, these findings show cross-culturally consistent effects: appearance-based judgments inform political perceptions. The cues that compel such judgments, however, remain poorly understood (Olivola & Todorov, 2010; Wänke, Samochowiec, & Landwehr, 2012).

*The gendered nature of politicians and politics*

We predicted that judgments of political party affiliation would rely on the sex-typicality of facial cues. Our prediction was guided by the gendered nature of the liberal-conservative continuum, in both policy advocacy and gender attitudes.

Across democratic political systems, women's historic realignment with more liberal politics (Inglehart & Norris, 2000) reflects shifts in political parties' values. In the U.S., for example, the Democratic Party is associated with socially liberal policies that aim to diminish gender disparities (e.g., women's rights, abortion rights); the Republican Party is associated with socially conservative policy issues that

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tend to bolster traditional sex roles (e.g., military spending, national defense; Winter, 2010). These policy platforms are manifest in each party's image. Consequently, politicians may exhibit characteristics that reflect these values.

Gender attitudes also differ reliably by political ideology. Conservatives, in particular, encourage adherence to traditional gender roles (Lye & Waldron, 1997). Thus, communal and feminine women are highly regarded. Consequently, Republican women may be uniquely prone to exhibit sex-typical characteristics.

We reasoned that differences in political platforms and gender attitudes may be reflected in politicians' facial appearance. Specifically, we predicted that the sex-typicality of politicians' faces (i.e., men's facial masculinity; women's facial femininity) would vary as a function of their political party, thereby providing reliable cues for observers' judgments of political party. We tested our predictions using a large and convenient sample—members of the 111th U.S. House of Representatives. In Study 1 we measured the sex-typicality of facial cues of politicians. In Study 2 we tested how facial sex-typicality related to perceivers' judgments of political party.

## Study 1

### Method

#### Target population

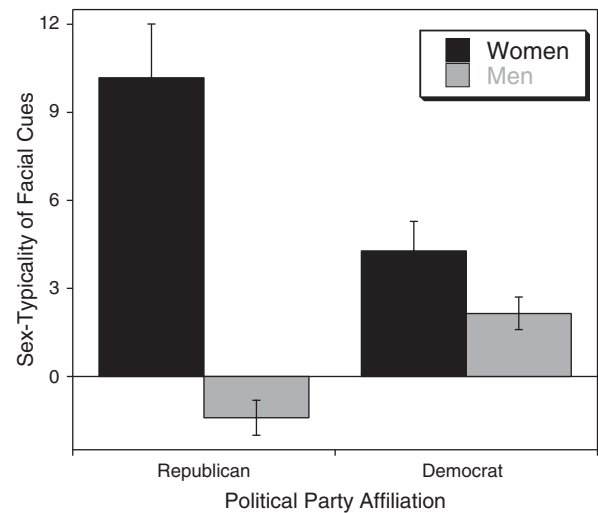
Targets included the 434 members of the 111th U.S. House of Representatives (74 women, 360 men, 1 vacant seat)—256 Democrats (199 men, 57 women) and 178 Republicans (161 men and 17 women).

#### Procedures

We downloaded photographs from each politician's government website and coded for sex and political party. We imported each image individually into FaceGen Modeler using the Photo Fit Tool (Blanz & Vetter, 1999), and we measured each face's sex-typicality (i.e., masculinity for men and femininity for women) using the Gender Morph tool.<sup>1</sup> Theoretical values ranged from  $-40$  (highly male-typed) to  $+40$  (highly female-typed). We converted this to a common scale for men and women, reflecting the objective level of sex-typical facial cues. Thus, positive values indicated sex-typical characteristics (i.e., masculine men and feminine women); negative values indicated sex-atypical characteristics (i.e., feminine men and masculine women).

## Results and discussion

We predicted that facial sex-typicality would vary as a function of Politician Party and Politician Sex. We analyzed sex-typicality using a 2 (Politician Sex) by 2 (Politician Party) ANOVA. Overall, women were more sex-typical than men (i.e., women were more feminine than men were masculine),  $F(1,430) = 39.54$ ,  $p < .001$ ; Republicans and Democrats did not differ in sex-typicality,  $F(1,430) = 1.15$ ,  $p = .284$ . However, the predicted interaction between Politician Party and Politician Sex was significant (see Fig. 1),  $F(1,430) = 18.76$ ,  $p < .0001$ . Among Republicans, women were significantly more sex-typical than men,  $F(1,430) = 37.98$ ,  $p < .0001$ ; among Democrats, this difference was much less pronounced,  $F(1,430) = 3.72$ ,  $p = .055$ . As predicted, among women, Republicans were significantly more sex-typical than Democrats,  $F(1,430) = 8.37$ ,  $p = .004$ . Unexpectedly, among men, Democrats were more sex-typical than Republicans,  $F(1,430) = 20.70$ ,  $p < .0001$ . Importantly, these patterns were replicated using each politician's liberal/conservative voting record as an index of politician ideology (see online Supplement).



**Fig. 1.** The sex-typicality of facial cues as a function of Politician Party and Politician Sex. Positive values indicate sex-typical facial characteristics (masculine men; feminine women). Negative values indicate sex-atypical characteristics (feminine men; masculine women). Error bars depict standard errors.

Next, we tested our prediction that Republican women would be the most sex-typical politicians. We compared the sex-typicality of Republican women to all other groups using a planned contrast (contrast weights: 3,  $-1$ ,  $-1$ ,  $-1$ ). As predicted, this contrast was significant,  $F(1, 430) = 21.454$ ,  $p < .0001$ , indicating that Republican women were uniquely sex-typical.

We found partial support for our prediction that facial sex-typicality would vary as a function of sex and political party. Although our prediction that Republicans would appear more sex-typical than Democrats overall, was not supported, our specific predictions were. Female politicians were significantly more feminine than male politicians were masculine. This effect was obtained primarily because Republican women were highly sex-typical. This finding aligns with the conservatives' endorsement of strict gender norms for women (Lye & Waldron, 1997).

## Study 2

If facial sex-typicality is apparent to perceivers, it may impact judgments of politicians. In Study 2, we examined whether judgments of political party relied on sex-typicality.

### Method

#### Participants

One hundred twenty UCLA undergraduate students (35 men, 82 women, 3 unspecified) participated for course credit.

#### Procedure

First, participants categorized the political party of the 434 politicians from Study 1 using computer keys labeled "Republican" and "Democrat." Each trial consisted of a fixation cross (500 ms), followed by a randomly selected face that appeared until a judgment was made. Then, participants rated a subset of faces for femininity/masculinity (see online Supplement).

## Results and discussion

### Analytic strategy

We analyzed data using generalized estimating equations to accommodate dichotomous (accuracy, party identification) outcomes

<sup>1</sup> FaceGen Modeler estimates the parameters of facial characteristics relative to a database of hundreds of three-dimensional face scans of men and women.

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