Do inferences of competence from faces predict political selection in authoritarian regimes? Evidence from China☆

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A B S T R A C T

Candidate appearance is a significant predictor of election outcomes in democracies because voters often make inference of competence based on facial appearance. Do inferences of competence from faces matter in autocracies? In this article, we study the effects of candidate appearance on the selection of three types of Chinese officials: (1) rural deputies elected to a local people's congress (LPC), (2) urban deputies elected to the LPC, and (3) unelected mayors and bureaucrats. We find that facial competence cues are relevant only to the votes received by rural LPC candidates. Our findings suggest the importance of information accessibility in political selection. In particular, the "selectorate" of mayors and bureaucrats do not need facial appearance cues because they have access to substantive information about the quality of political candidates. Our findings provide a possible explanation for the resilience of some autocracies: they are able to identify talent through an informative, albeit non-electoral, selection mechanism.

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1. Introduction

There is a growing scholarly interest in studying the facial appearance of elected officials because recent studies find that it is a strong predictor of success in democratic elections (Atkinson et al., 2009; Ballew and Todorov, 2007; Banducci et al., 2008; King and Leigh, 2009; Lawson et al., 2010; Rosar et al., 2008). Extant theories argue that voters in democracies tend to use facial appearance cues to infer a candidate's competence. Does facial appearance affect the outcomes of political selection in authoritarian regimes? Surprisingly, this question receives far less scholarly attention, despite a rapidly expanding literature on elections in authoritarian regimes (see, for example, Geddes, 1999; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2005; Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007; Boix and Svolik, 2013).

There are at least two reasons for this lacuna. First, political competition in autocracies has often been characterized as opaque, unpredictable, and violent (Herz, 1952), compared with that in democracies. A disproportionate amount of scholarly attention has been accorded to the study of authoritarian breakdown in the form of coups d'etat or revolutions (Geddes, 1999; Svolik, 2012). Even for non-violent leadership transitions, it is generally believed that the outcomes are determined by established rules such as hereditary succession (Brownlee, 2007), by informal political connections (Bueno de Mesquita et al.,

2003), or by common performance metrics (Maskin et al., 2000). No theory links facial appearance to leadership transition in autocracies.

The second reason is that ordinary people are believed to play an insignificant role in selecting political leaders in authoritarian regimes. In the post-Cold War era, most autocracies hold somewhat competitive elections on a regular basis in order to legitimize the regimes (Geddes, 2004), divide the opposition (Lust-Okar, 2005), and distribute spoils (Blaydes, 2010). The playing field of such elections is, however, heavily skewed in favor of the authoritarian incumbents (most notably, Levitsky and Way, 2010). Recent works focus predominantly on how authoritarian incumbents manipulate the electoral rule to guarantee their electoral victory (Birch, 2011; Donno, 2013; Norris, 2014). When ordinary people cannot participate in a genuine democratic election, how they choose candidates — no matter whether their judgment is based on candidates' competence or appearance — seems irrelevant.

In this article, we argue that the effects of facial cues on political selection in autocracies deserve a systematic investigation, instead of speculation. For one thing, many ordinary citizens do participate in authoritarian elections, despite their known bias in favor of the ruling elite. How these citizens assess the information about political candidates compared with their democratic counterpart is in itself a theoretically interesting question. Even in non-electoral political selection, the potential effects of facial cues should not be ignored. If political selection is determined solely at the whim of the dictator, then the facial appearance of political candidates may have a significant effect, as dictators, like ordinary people, are likely to possess a subjective bias for beautiful, rather than homely, people (Hamermesh, 2011). Nevertheless, if facial appearance turns out to have little effect on the selection outcomes, this may suggest that political selection in autocracies is less haphazard than some think; it may be duly regulated by established norms and objective criteria.

The current study is intended to fill the lacuna by analyzing the effects of facial appearance, if any, in China's political selection. In particular, we examine a diverse set of Chinese officials: (1) mayors and bureaucrats whose appointments are determined solely by the nomenklatura system of the Communist Party, (2) rural deputies to a local people's congress (LPC), who are selected by rural constituents voting in a somewhat competitive election, and (3) urban deputies to the same LPC. The urban LPC deputies serve as the "control group," because the information about these political candidates, including their facial appearance, is generally unavailable to the "selectorate" of these officials. On the other hand, the rural LPC deputies, mayors and bureaucrats can be considered as two "treatment groups." These two treatment groups differ in one crucial condition: while the "selectorate" of mayors and bureaucrats has access to substantively important information about the political candidates such as job performance, rural voters who elect rural LPC deputies possess little information about the political candidates beyond their facial appearance.

We conduct an electronic survey asking respondents to rate these three groups of Chinese officials by their facial competence. With their ratings, we develop a "facial competence score," which is then used to predict their official rankings or election outcomes. Because the political selection mechanisms of these officials differ from each other, the associated impact of facial appearance also varies. Facial appearance shows a significant positive effect on the selection outcome only in the group of rural deputies, but not in the other two types. The results suggest that facial appearance cues are also relevant to the political selection of authoritarian regimes to the extent that such cues are available to the "selectorate." Yet, the importance of facial appearance cues would decline with the selectors' ability to gain access to substantively important information about political candidates.

The rest of the article is divided into four sections. In Section 2, we overview existing studies on the effects of facial appearance on social, economic, and political outcomes, and derive testable hypotheses about the effects on the outcomes of political selection in autocracies. In Section 3, we present the background information on two types of political selection in China. We discuss the research design in Section 4, and present our empirical findings in Section 5. In the last section, we discuss the implications of our findings.

2. Effects of facial appearance on political selection in autocracies

In post-Cold War era, there is a proliferation of authoritarian regimes that hold somewhat competitive multi-party elections on a regular basis (Geddes, 2004). Opposition candidates are often allowed to stand in these elections, although the electoral playing field is notoriously skewed in favor of the authoritarian incumbents (Levitsky and Way, 2010). Many citizens still choose to participate in such elections, and need to decide whom to support. This is not necessarily an easy task. Extant works on voting behavior in democracies have long pointed out the cognitive burdens that confront voters. In particular, the cost of being well-informed about political affairs, candidates' past records, policy preferences, and the relevant facts is simply too high. It is also unlikely that anyone can cast a decisive vote in an election. As Bartels (1996) succinctly puts, "gathering political information merely for the sake of casting one informed vote in an electorate of millions would violate the principle of 'rational ignorance' (p. 197)."

For this reason, when voters in democracies evaluate candidates, oftentimes they would rely only on "information shortcuts" or low information heuristics[1] such as party affiliation, endorsement of opinion leaders, and incumbency

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[1] Low information heuristics in the current study are defined as information cues that allow voters to infer candidates' policy positions with minimal cognitive effort. By contrast, high information heuristics refer to detailed and specific information about the candidates or their policy positions that voters cannot process without investing substantial cognitive effort.