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Pretty faces, marginal races: Predicting election outcomes using trait assessments of British parliamentary candidates

Kyle Mattes [a], Caitlin Milazzo [b,*]

[a] Department of Political Science, University of Iowa, USA
[b] School of Politics and International Relations, University of Nottingham, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

The conventional wisdom on Western European politics leads us to believe that all the "action" lies with parties, because the unified parliamentary delegations in Western Europe draw voters' attention to parties' policies and images. Though British elections take place under a single member district plurality system, British parties, like their continental counterparts, are highly centralised and feature disciplined parliamentary delegations. Despite the strong ties between British candidates and their parties, we demonstrate that perceptions of candidates' personal attributes can be used to predict general election outcomes. Using a computer-based survey where subjects are asked to evaluate real British candidates using only rapidly determined first impressions of facial images, we successfully predict outcomes from the 2010 general election. Moreover, we find that perceptions of candidates' relative attractiveness are particularly useful for predicting outcomes in marginal constituencies.

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1. Introduction

Studies on parties' election strategies in the US frequently focus on candidates and geographically-based districts (e.g., Ansolabehere et al., 2001; Burden, 2004; Stone and Simas, 2010). In contrast, applications to Western Europe focus almost exclusively on the parties' actions (e.g., Adams et al., 2005; Somer-Topcu, 2009, Clark and Leiter, 2013). The reason for this discrepancy is that the conventional wisdom on Western European politics leads us to believe that all the "action" lies with parties, because the unified parliamentary delegations in Western Europe draw voters' attention to parties' national images. Though British elections take place under a single member district plurality system, British parties, like their continental counterparts, are highly centralised and feature disciplined parliamentary delegations. Thus, the policies and images of leaders and party elites are often given priority over those of the individual candidates.

However, the prominence of party in the British system may be weakening. For example, there is evidence that voters may be relying less on partisanship as a means to determine their vote choice. Numerous studies document a significant partisan dealignment in the British electorate (Sárlvik and Crewe, 1983; Denver, 2003; Dalton, 2008; Clarke et al., 2009). Moreover, the correlation between voters' policy positions and their party support has declined (Sanders, 1999; Milazzo et al., 2012), suggesting that voters' policy beliefs exert weaker effects on their vote choice. As the ties between voters and parties' policy positions weaken, scholars of British politics increasingly point to the role of non-policy characteristics, such as competence or experience, in the electoral process (e.g., Clarke et al., 2004, 2009; Green and Hobolt, 2008; Clark, 2009). While much of the literature stresses the non-policy traits of parties, there is also an emerging literature focusing on the non-policy traits of British *candidates* (e.g., Johns and Shephard, 2007, 2011; Banducci et al., 2008; Buttice and Milazzo, 2011).

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: kyle-mattes@uiowa.edu (K. Mattes), caitlin.milazzo@nottingham.ac.uk (C. Milazzo).

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Using a computer-based survey where subjects were asked to evaluate real British candidates from the 2010 general election using only rapidly determined first impressions of facial images, we demonstrate a relationship between perceptions of candidates' traits and electoral outcomes in Britain. Moreover, we provide evidence that the nature of this relationship is contingent on electoral marginality. We find that citizens' perceptions of candidates' relative attractiveness are particularly useful for predicting electoral outcomes in marginal seats. Using only subjects' perceptions of candidates' relative attractiveness, we predict the general election outcomes in 72 per cent of the marginal constituencies included in our sample, while perceptions of competence correctly predict 67 per cent of the outcomes in safe seats. We then merge our data with responses from the 2010 British Election Study (BES), and we find that perceptions of attractiveness remain a significant predictor of election outcomes even when we control for the effect of party identification.

While our study is the first to connect rapidly-determined perceptions of candidate traits to general electoral outcomes in Britain, our findings are consistent with a growing literature documenting a relationship between perceptions of candidate traits and voting behaviour in candidate-centric systems such as Brazil (Lawson et al., 2010), Finland (Berggren et al., 2010), Ireland (Buckleye et al., 2007), and the United States (e.g., Todorov et al., 2005; Benjamin and Shapiro, 2009; Hayes, 2010), as well as an increasing number of more party-centred systems, including Australia (King and Leigh, 2009), Canada (Efron and Patterson, 1974), France (Antoniakis and Dalgas, 2009), Germany (Rosar et al., 2008), Britain (e.g., Johns and Shephard, 2007, 2011; Banducci et al., 2008), and Switzerland (Lutz, 2010).

2. British candidates' physical attributes as a non-policy heuristic

To evaluate parties based on issues, voters must possess issue preferences, and be able to perceive policy differences between parties (Campbell et al., 1960; Butler and Stokes, 1974). The ability of British voters to differentiate between parties based on policy has been hindered by the significant policy convergence characterising the post-Thatcher period, a finding that is supported by an empirical literature documenting declines in the relationship of left-right attitudes on British vote choices and on partisanship (Sanders, 1999; Green and Hobolt, 2008; Milazzo et al., 2012). Scholars also note a parallel depolarisation in British citizens' partisan loyalties (Heath, 1991; Whiteley and Seyd, 2002; Clarke et al., 2009). Taken together, this work suggests that British voters may be relying less on traditional heuristics, such as party identification and parties' policy positions, to adjudicate between their political choices.

At the same time, citizens must be able to differentiate between parties (or candidates) on some dimension. Thus, British politics scholars increasingly point to the role of non-policy characteristics of British parties (e.g., Clarke et al., 2004, 2009; Green and Hobolt, 2008) and candidates (e.g., Johns and Shephard, 2007, 2011; Banducci et al., 2008; Buttice and Milazzo, 2011) in determining citizens' electoral choices. With respect to candidates, citizens appear to value the constituency services that MPs provide (e.g., Cain et al., 1987; Heitshusen et al., 2005), and experienced candidates possess knowledge and connections that enhance their ability to provide these services. Similarly, candidates with constituency connections are more attractive to voters (Campbell and Cowley, 2013). As a result, local party organisations frequently stress candidates' non-policy attributes in campaign leaflets.[1]

While perceptions of candidates' traits may not constitute an informed means of determining vote choice, perceptions are a accessible heuristic because individuals frequently use stereotype assessments of physical and/or character traits to evaluate the people they encounter in their daily lives (Zebrowitz et al., 1996; Hassin and Trope, 2000; Haxby et al., 2000; Bar et al., 2006). These "first-impression" judgements help individuals determine who they consider competent or trustworthy. The research from political science is consistent with other social and behavioural science research, which finds that rapid evaluations of faces influence social decisions (e.g., Ambady and Rosenthal, 1993; Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994; Blair et al., 2004; Olson and Marshuetz, 2005). "Snap" judgements about strangers are accurate predictors of both teacher evaluations (Ambady and Rosenthal, 1993) and election outcomes (Todorov et al., 2005); moreover, they are resistant to change (e.g., Redlawsk, 2002). In sum, scholarly research has uncovered ample evidence validating folk wisdom about the longevity and importance of first impressions.

Several recent studies link real world election results with the reflexive "first-impression" judgements of research participants in the laboratory. Participants' trait judgements, though based only on unlabelled head shots of unfamiliar candidates, nevertheless predict the real election winners (e.g., Todorov et al., 2005; Antoniakis and Dalgas, 2009; Berggren et al., 2010). Moreover, participants' exposure to the candidates' pictures need not be prolonged – election winners can be predicted from participants' trait judgements with as little as 33 ms of exposure time. Indeed, such judgements appear to predict election winners with a remarkable degree of accuracy. In US Congress and gubernatorial elections, candidates judged more competent in the laboratory were real election winners about 70 per cent of the time (Todorov et al., 2005; Ballew and Todorov, 2007), and candidates judged more personally threatening were election losers about 65 per cent of the time (Spezio et al., 2008; Mattes et al., 2010).

2.1. Electoral marginality and perceptions of British candidates' attributes

If perceptions of candidates' non-policy traits factor into British voters' decision-making processes, then these perceptions may be particularly useful for predicting electoral

[1] In addition to leaflets, parties also increasingly rely on candidate websites. Prior to the 2010 general election, approximately two-thirds of the candidates from the major parties had personal websites (Wring and Ward, 2010).

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