



## FlashReport

## Competence ratings in US predict presidential election outcomes in Bulgaria

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## HIGHLIGHTS

- We examine whether judgments of faces could predict Presidential election results.
- US participants' hypothetical choices paralleled actual Bulgarian election outcomes.
- We found strong correlations between facial competence and election outcomes.
- Results persisted across the full range of 18 candidates.

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## ABSTRACT

Although democracies should ideally elect leaders based on their abilities, voters are often biased by seemingly unrelated factors, such as a candidate's appearance. Prior work examining the relations between election outcomes and appearance has primarily focused on a restricted range of the top candidates, examined in pairwise comparisons. In the present study, we tested whether the predictive ability of ratings based on facial appearance would extend to a wider range of candidates. Specifically, we examined whether individuals in the US could predict outcomes in the 2011 Bulgarian presidential elections by evaluating the facial appearance of 18 candidates. The large number of candidates naturally running for the high level office allowed us to accurately test the strength of the relationship between judgments of facial appearance and election outcomes across a broad range of faces. We found that a strong correlation between ratings of facial competence and election outcomes persisted across the full range of candidates, and that US participants' hypothetical choices paralleled actual Bulgarian election outcomes. We demonstrated that competence ratings were more effective at predicting election outcomes than judgments on a variety of other characteristics deemed important by Bulgarian voters as well as ratings of attractiveness. Furthermore, judgments of competence largely drove the correlation between hypothetical and actual votes.

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## Introduction

In democratic states, where broad swaths of a country's population are responsible for selecting leaders, voters should be able to incorporate relevant cues about politicians into their voting decisions while disregarding irrelevant factors. The assumption that voters are able to do so helps enable society to entrust average individuals with consequential decisions. Ideally, voters would make decisions based on leaders' ability alone. However, a growing body of research demonstrates that voters often rely on heuristics when evaluating candidates, leading a range of other factors to predict strongly voter choices and election outcomes (e.g., Ballew & Todorov, 2007; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Lawson, Lenz, Baker, & Myers, 2010; Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, & Hall, 2005). While reliance on certain cues

such as political party affiliation may help voters compensate for insufficient knowledge (e.g., Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960), other heuristics may be less informative.

For example, people often and spontaneously base inferences about underlying traits on physical appearance (e.g., Hall, Goren, Chaiken, & Todorov, 2009; Hassin & Trope, 2000; Montepare & Zebrowitz, 1998; Todorov, Said, Engell, & Oosterhof, 2008; Todorov, Said, & Verosky, 2011; Zebrowitz & Montepare, 2008). In the context of political choices, trait evaluations based exclusively on appearances have been shown to correlate strongly with election outcomes (see Hall et al., 2009; Olivola & Todorov, 2010 for reviews).

Competence is considered to be one of the most important traits for political candidates to possess (Miller, Wattenberg, & Malanchuk, 1986; Trent, Mongeau, Trent, Kendall, & Cushing, 1993). Consistent with this evaluation, competence ratings (and those of related traits such as intelligence and leadership) determined solely by headshots of candidates have consistently been found to predict election outcomes, and to be the best predictor among a wide variety of traits examined in a similar fashion, including attractiveness (e.g., Olivola &

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Todorov, 2010; Todorov et al., 2005). Given the true value that voters place on competence in their leaders, voters may genuinely be searching for legitimate markers of this trait. However, rather than relying on substantive information such as candidate records, voters may unintentionally be turning to heuristic cues such as appearance to learn about a candidate's competence (Lenz & Lawson, 2011). For example, although attractiveness should not influence a politician's ability, ratings of attractiveness have frequently been tied to election outcomes (e.g., Berggren, Jordahl, & Poutvaara, 2010; King & Leigh, 2009; Langlois et al., 2000). Since impressions are formed rapidly upon seeing a candidate's face (e.g., Bar, Neta, & Linz, 2006; Locher, Unger, Sociedade, & Wahl, 1993; Todorov, Pakrashi, & Oosterhof, 2009; Willis & Todorov, 2006), these impressions may have lasting influence on decisions, even without voters' awareness.

Existing literature on the role of evaluations of facial competence in predicting election outcomes has focused primarily on comparing top contenders in historical elections. However, this approach limits the set of relevant candidates to those already determined to be frontrunners. In most cases, the candidates being compared have been prescreened by major political parties before qualifying as candidates in the race (and consequently as stimuli in the study). Focusing on this narrow set of faces may limit the generalizability of results to an artificial set of choices predetermined by the major political parties. There is evidence that parties will put their best looking candidates in close elections. This would argue that part of the competence effects are driven by strategic party decisions rather than by voters' choices on the ground (see Atkinson, Enos, & Hill, 2009). This is quite unlikely in the present case since the threshold for inclusion in the election is so low, which allows us to understand voters' decisions more directly. Determining whether the same pattern persists further down the spectrum has practical importance as well. For example, this could be relevant when considering a vice presidential candidate's influence on a ballot, or a political system with more complex voting rules.

In this paper, we examine how US participants' competence ratings correlate with actual votes in the 2011 Bulgarian presidential elections. This research contributes to existing literature in a variety of ways. In particular, the Bulgarian presidential elections are worthy of study because candidates face minimal obstacles to appearing on the ballot, even though they are competing for a very high level office. Consequently, a large number of individuals run for president in any given election year; 18 candidates in the year under investigation. This large number allows for variability in facial features that provides new insight into how strongly ratings of competence predict election outcomes across a wide range of candidates. Additionally, we surveyed Bulgarian citizens on their opinions about the characteristics they considered most important in their leaders to determine which characteristics to examine. This allowed for a direct test of the predictive ability of competence ratings relative to a deliberately chosen set of the most relevant characteristics. The current research also circumvents the problem of participants' recognizing candidates running for the high-level political office by relying on a culturally and geographically distinct population, and by examining judgments of facial characteristics *before* the actual elections.

## Methods

### Participants

We recruited 223 US residents (average age 32.3, 50% male) through Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk website ([www.mturk.com](http://www.mturk.com)), who participated for payment.

### Selection of relevant characteristics

To understand which characteristics Bulgarian voters valued in their president, we first asked 140 respondents from 7 regions in Bulgaria

(differing in age, gender and education) to list which attributes they considered to be most important in their president. We considered an attribute to warrant further investigation if more than 25 participants spontaneously listed it. Second, in a face-to-face survey, we asked a representative sample of 1020 Bulgarian respondents to indicate how important each attribute was for the Bulgarian president to have on a 5-point scale. Four attributes that were consistently rated as important by Bulgarian respondents and could be easily translated for American respondents were selected for the study: competence, dominance, honesty/incorruptibility, and likability. We also included attractiveness, since the relationship between this attribute and voting behavior has been commonly studied in the past.

### Stimuli and procedure

We obtained neutral headshots for each of the 18 candidates in the 2011 Bulgarian presidential elections. These images were standardized in size, converted to black-and-white, and placed on gray backgrounds (see Todorov et al., 2005 for details).

Participants were randomly assigned to make one of six evaluations.<sup>1</sup> In five cases, participants were told:

*You will be presented with a series of pictures of people. We are interested in your first impression of these people. For each person, please indicate your impression of how [competent/ dominant/ likeable/ honest and incorruptible/ attractive] he or she is on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely). There are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in your first impressions.*

Each participant saw only one of the characteristics in brackets above. For the sixth type of evaluation, participants were told to imagine that the pictures were of candidates for political office, and to indicate how likely they would be to vote for each one on a scale from 1 (not at all likely) to 7 (extremely likely). Participants in all conditions rated unlabeled images of each of the 18 candidates' faces presented one at a time in a random order, see Fig. 1.

Before completing the study, participants stated whether they recognized anyone in the images they had rated, and responded to demographic questions.

## Results

Prior to analysis, we discarded data from seven participants who reported recognizing at least one person, two for being repeat survey-takers, and six for failing to complete the study. Results remain consistent, with significant values maintained, when these participants are included. We computed average ratings across the remaining participants for each of the presidential candidates on each characteristic evaluated, see Table 1. A minimum of 32 participants' judgments was averaged to determine each candidate characteristic rating, with Cronbach's  $\alpha$  ranging from 0.77 to 0.95 across characteristics.

To analyze the data, we examined correlations between candidate ratings on each characteristic as judged by US participants and actual election outcomes. Facial competence ratings were significantly correlated with election outcomes, measured by continuous ratings of competence and percent of votes received ( $r=0.53$ ,  $p=0.024$ ). None of the other evaluated characteristics (attractiveness, dominance, honesty, likeability) were significantly correlated with votes received, see Table 2. In addition to competence ratings, US participants' likelihood of voting for "hypothetical" candidates based on their images was also significantly correlated with real election outcomes ( $r=0.55$ ,  $p=0.017$ ).

<sup>1</sup> Attractiveness ratings were collected separately, after the other attributes, out of concern that this relationship could account for the relationship between competence and votes.

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