



The looks of a winner: Beauty and electoral success

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ABSTRACT

We study the role of beauty in politics using candidate photos that figured prominently in electoral campaigns. Our investigation is based on visual assessments of 1929 Finnish political candidates from 10,011 respondents (of which 3708 were Finnish). As Finland has a proportional electoral system, we are able to compare the electoral success of non-incumbent candidates representing the same party. An increase in our measure of beauty by one standard deviation is associated with an increase of 20% in the number of votes for the average non-incumbent parliamentary candidate. The relationship is unaffected by including education and occupation as control variables and withstands several other robustness checks.

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1. Introduction

Are good looks an advantage in politics? For several reasons they could be. If good-looking people are more persuasive, are treated better in social interaction and achieve higher occupational success – as evidenced in a meta-study by [Langlois et al. \(2000\)](#) – they might also do better in politics.

In the vocabulary of [Ambady and Rosenthal \(1992\)](#), good looks could function as a “thin slice” of information or as a heuristic in decision-making. Already [Downs \(1957\)](#) proposed that many voters are rather uninformed about the details of politics, a view that is further supported by [Bartels \(1996\)](#). Perhaps as a result voters focus on personal characteristics of the candidates, as [Wattenberg \(1991\)](#) argues. Or for that matter, people might just prefer to look at beautiful people as suggested by the importance of looks in the entertainment industry. Against this background, we investigate if visual assessments of political candidates can explain election outcomes.

Our main result is that beauty seems to help. We find that an increase in beauty by one standard deviation is associated with a 20%

increase in the number of votes for the average non-incumbent parliamentary candidate. Beauty is more strongly correlated with success than either perceived competence or trustworthiness. The positive relationship between beauty and electoral success holds for both male and female candidates. The analysis is based on four web surveys with over 1900 facial photos of Finnish political candidates. Altogether, we collected assessments from 10,011 respondents. About 2800 non-Finnish and about 3700 Finnish respondents were told that the persons in photos are political candidates. About 3500 respondents from outside of Finland were not told anything about the persons in photos. In these three surveys with a large number of respondents, each respondent was shown a random selection of photos and was asked to assess the candidates' beauty, as well as perceived competence, trustworthiness, likability and intelligence. In the fourth survey with 16 respondents, each respondent assessed all 504 photos of candidates in the Helsinki municipal election. For each survey, we investigate to what extent the candidates' individual beauty scores (relative to the beauty of competing candidates) are associated with their electoral success in the 2003 parliamentary or 2004 municipal elections.

Our main contributions can be summarized in three points. First, we are the first to study the effects of facial appearance on the success of political candidates who compete against other candidates from the same party. Second, we are able to focus on competition between a large number of non-incumbent candidates – about most of whom

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voters can be expected to have little or no information other than party, occupation, education, and visual cues. Both of these advances are made possible by the proportional electoral system in Finland.³ And while we focus on competition between non-incumbent candidates, we can also analyze incumbency effects. Finnish voters who are unsatisfied with an incumbent can vote for a challenger from the same party. Our third contribution consists of a systematic investigation of the role of gender. If beauty matters for electoral success, then an important question is if it gives different advantages to male and female candidates. Finnish elections are unusually suited for gender analysis, since there is a sizable number of both male and female candidates in all districts.

The role of facial appearance in politics can be related to earlier findings of a “beauty premium” in the labor market (see Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994) but has attracted academic interest only recently. Todorov et al. (2005) find that inferences of competence from photos help predict the outcomes of elections to the U.S. Congress (72% of Senate races and 67% of House races). King and Leigh (2007), Rosar et al. (2008), Antonakis and Dalgas (2009), Benjamin and Shapiro (2009), Leigh and Susilo (2009) and Atkinson et al. (2009) also find that candidate appearance helps to predict electoral outcomes in various countries, each focusing on competition in one-member districts.

A major benefit of focusing on within-party competition is that we avoid problems of reverse causality which may plague studies based on between-party competition in one-member districts. Political parties may be more likely to attract more popular (e.g., more beautiful) candidates in districts in which they have an electoral advantage (Carson et al., 2007). This problem could confound the intriguing finding by Todorov et al. (2005) and other papers that focus on one-member districts. Unlike studies of between-party competition, we are able to construct our electoral-success variable in such a way – the vote share on a list featuring competition against candidates from the same party – that the relationship between expected electoral outcomes of various parties and candidate selection is unlikely to influence the results.

By studying within-party competition, we also control for the effect of ideology on voter choice, as candidates of the same party in Finland are ideologically quite homogeneous, unlike candidates of different parties. In the Finnish election study from the 2003 parliamentary election, most voters said that political opinions and party were crucial for their choice of candidate. Even so, personal appearance and style was important for one third of the voters. As over half of the voters considered a candidate's political experience important and over a third valued a candidate's education, most voters think that a candidate's personal characteristics and expected competence, not just political party, matter (see Bengtsson and Grönlund, 2005).

Studying within-party competition in Finland offers interesting insights also for countries with one-member electoral districts, like the United States. Most obviously, party primaries are an important stage in American federal and state-level elections. Our study provides reliable estimates on the relative importance of several aspects of candidate appearance at this stage of the electoral process. As ideological considerations are more important in general elections, our results arguably give an upper bound for the effects of various aspects of candidate appearance in between-party competition. However, there is no reason to expect the relative importance of various aspects of personal appearance to differ between within-party and between-party competition. With or without ideological competition, voters tend to prefer competent, trustworthy and likable politicians.⁴

We also think that some aspects of our research design form a contribution. By having respondents from Finland and from many other countries and by studying their assessments separately, we are able to say that the results hold irrespective of the nationality of the respondents (who, in the case of Finns, may recognize the candidates). In addition, our survey where respondents were not told that the photos depict political candidates provides information about whether knowing this affects the assessment.

In order to see how reliable our findings are, we include occupation and education, as reported on electoral lists, as alternative explanations of electoral success. Since occupation and education serve as signals of competence we can test if beauty has an effect of its own that is independent of its signalling competence. The relationship between beauty and electoral success is unaffected by including education and occupation as control variables and also withstands several other robustness checks.

2. Institutional facts, surveys and data

2.1. Institutional facts

The political setting for this study is Finland, and its electoral system is proportional. Finland has a one-chamber legislature, and the country is divided into fourteen mainland districts electing in total 199 legislators and the autonomous province of Åland electing one. Elections are held every four years. The number of MPs elected from the 14 mainland districts varies between six and 33. In each parliamentary district, parties present lists of their candidates, typically in alphabetical order but sometimes with incumbents listed first, and each voter chooses one candidate on one list. The number of candidates that a party can present equals the number of representatives elected from the district, if this is 14 or more. In small districts with less than 14 seats, parties can present 14 candidates. The legislature seats of a given district are allocated based on party vote shares to the candidates in accordance with their “competitive indices”, using the d'Hondt seat-allocation rule. In each party, the candidate with the highest number of votes receives as his or her competitive index the total number of votes obtained by his or her party, the candidate with the second highest number of votes obtains an index calculated as half of the party votes, the third candidate gets an index equal to a third of the party votes, etc. Then all candidates are ranked on the basis of their indices, and from this list, there will be elected as many candidates as there are seats in the electoral district. In the municipal elections, competitive indices are calculated in a similar way, with each municipality forming a district.

In the 2003 parliamentary election, turnout was 69.7%. Female candidates won 75 of the 200 seats in parliament (Nurmi and Nurmi, 2004).⁵

2.2. The surveys

In order for beauty to be a meaningful variable for social scientists to study, perceptions of it need to be quantified as well as reflect somewhat of a stable consensus. Langlois et al. (2000) in fact find that there is considerable agreement about who is and who is not attractive, both within and across cultures. On this basis, we have conducted four web surveys based on the same questionnaire, but with some modifications in each treatment. In addition to asking about beauty, we also included questions about four other traits in order to find out more precisely what determines electoral success and how the results are to be interpreted.⁶ By collecting responses

³ According to Reynolds et al. (2005), there are proportional electoral systems with party lists in 68 countries including Finland.

⁴ Although we believe that the study of within-party competition constitutes a methodological improvement, for the reasons outlined, it is still the case that candidate entry could be endogenous to beauty and other characteristics, which could induce a correlation with unobservables. This should be kept in mind when interpreting our results.

⁵ For more facts about the Finnish political system, see Raunio (2005).

⁶ We do not claim that the assessments represent “true” characteristics of the political candidates. This study is about perceptions and none of the relationships reported should be interpreted as claims of a relationship among any underlying true characteristics.

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