

Argumentative Essay: Appearance Discrimination in Politics

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Abstract

The purpose of the research paper is to inform the reader of the impact a political candidate's appearance has on his or her electoral success. The author cites sources that confirm role-independent traits (appearance, personality, other non-political traits) play a more crucial role in people's voting decisions compared to the role-relevant traits (experience, political record, proposed plans) of politicians. The research paper cites evidence that proves role-independent traits are more important to voters by referencing research that explains how quickly individuals subconsciously identify the winner of an election after watching 10-second silent clips by observing candidate body language. The race and gender of politicians also influences the perceptions of voters, as voters have been proven to identify and relate different characteristics to different races and genders while other factors are held constant. Research also proves that certain appearance features like babyface and posture can either benefit or harm certain candidates depending on the circumstances. Finally, various media outlets like Facebook and YouTube influence people's perceptions about political candidates in different ways. In conclusion, appearance discrimination in politics is a very complex topic, and it takes place in several different ways. Not much research has been done on why this takes place, but there is enough evidence in previous research that allows the author of this paper to conclude that people do vote for political candidates based their respective appearances.

Appearance Discrimination in Politics

Introduction

The act of discrimination is one of the most repetitive behaviors in human culture. Intentional or not, people discriminate against other people, places, objects and ideas every day. This is mostly due to the extreme diversity that the human race offers, as different appearances, different ideas, and different cultures are the framework of human mankind. Yet while favoritism may be inevitable in our society and usually shows up in only superficial matters, discrimination can have serious consequences in certain situations where the stakes are high. Appearance-based discrimination in politics occurs at very high frequencies and affects people's voting behavior. It is important to note the following: "in empirical electoral research, one usually distinguishes between role-relevant (political) and role-independent (non-political) qualities of politicians" (Rosar, Klein & Beckers, 2008, p. 64). Appearance discrimination in politics takes place when voters practice *personalization hypothesis*, which is defined as the following: "the growing importance of the non-political traits [over the political-based traits]" (Rosar, Klein & Beckers, 2008, p. 64).

In general, it has been proven that a candidate's attractiveness does matter when running for electoral office, as prior research shows that those who are perceived as "attractive" are labeled as sociable, intelligent, physically and mentally fit, self-assured, strong and competent. More attractive candidates are also better remembered by voters when it comes time to vote (Rosar, Klein, & Beckers, 2008). However, the rate at which people come to these conclusions is equally astounding, as research has concluded the following: "first impressions based on appearances are remarkably influential,

frustratingly difficult to overcome, and occur with astonishing speed” (Olivola & Todorov, 2010, p. 105).

In spite of numerous studies, appearance discrimination in politics is still a relatively difficult problem to research and address due to the fact that attractiveness is subjective, as it is “in the eyes of the beholder.” Furthermore, political scientists allude to the following: “normative aspects are of importance; from the viewpoint of classical democratic theory, the possible influence of a physical attractiveness on electoral outcomes is ‘unwelcome’ and has been beyond the scope of mainstream and political science” (Rosar, Klein, & Beckers, 2008, p. 65). Another potential issue is stated in the following quote: “it is difficult to judge the physical attractiveness of well-known or popular candidates without any party affiliation, political positions and biography of each individual person being factors [in one’s voting decision]” (Rosar, Klein, & Beckers, 2008, p. 65). Appearance discrimination is defined as the following: “[it’s] not just a practical research problem, but also a problem of theory. Studies show that attractiveness plays less crucial of a role compared to individual personality and character, as action and behavior gain importance as deeper social relations develop” (Rosar, Klein, & Beckers, 2008, p. 65). All of these challenges are part of the reason why little research has been done on the role of physical attractiveness in politics.

However, while it may be true that attractiveness plays less of a role once deeper social relations develop between people in the workforce and in friendships, the vast majority of voters are not able to personally meet and have extended interactions with political candidates. Consequently, researchers have concluded the following: “this implies that physical attractiveness may play a more important role in the evaluations of

politicians who are less familiar to the voters” (Rosar, Klein, & Beckers, 2008, p. 65).

Given the obvious stakes of a gubernatorial or presidential election, it is a serious problem if the majority of voters are voting based solely on the physical appearance of a politician while ignoring his or her political record, experience and other benchmarks that define political candidates as qualified or unqualified. The end result is that the most qualified candidates do not always get voted into office, an outcome that has the potential to undermine the safety and the stability of the United States if a serious crisis comes up that a more qualified and experienced candidate would be better capable to handle. It is abundantly clear that the issue of voters ignoring a politician’s credentials is more prevalent than ever before and the trend is accelerating for several reasons.

Argument

First, voters are emphasizing the role-independent qualities of a political candidate over his or her role-relevant traits. This trend has been proven by numerous recent studies that show how evident this issue is in the twenty-first century. The following results demonstrate how influential physical attractiveness is to the voters: “If we assume that a party replaces its candidates in all constituencies with highly attractive persons, its share of the votes will increase by 1.7 percentage points” (Rosar, Klein, & Beckers, 2008, p. 77). In many situations, 1.7 percentage points may not sound like a substantial number, but in terms of elections this conclusion could not be further from the truth. In many recent presidential elections, the general population vote has hovered near an even fifty/fifty split. As a result, in many electoral races, a 1.7 percentage point swing in either direction may change the outcome of the race. Essentially, this finding proves that in many close elections, attractiveness is what separates the elected candidate from

the defeated politician. Perhaps even more startling than the fact that people vote for more attractive candidates is the lack of complexity in which many folks relate a person's competence to their attractiveness. The following results cited from the article, "Elected in 100 Milliseconds, Appearance-Based Trait Inferences and Voting," clearly displays the parity in decision making between two age groups of people despite their differences in intelligence and knowledge:

Specifically, Antonakis and Dalgas asked children aged 5–13 years to play a computer simulated game in which they were asked to judge which person, in a pair of photos, they would choose to captain a boat through a difficult mission. Remarkably, the judgments of children and older participants were highly correlated. In fact, children's judgments predicted the election outcomes as well as those provided by the older cohort. These findings suggest that appearance-based trait inferences develop quite early and are surprisingly stable throughout a person's life (Olivola & Todorov, 2010, p. 89).

These results validate the obvious: although adults have more intellectual and reasoning abilities than children, older folks subconsciously choose to rely on role-independent traits. Contrary to what society would make one think, many adults do not evolve to look past basic elementary decision processes and, as a result, do not vote for a political candidate based on his or her political record but on his or her physical appearance. Also equally astounding is the speed at which these inferences are made. A recent study concluded the following: "participants who saw 10-second silent video clips of televised gubernatorial election debates were able to predict the winner of each race with surprising accuracy, even after controlling for a number of variables, and even for

elections that were judged to be quite close (at the time of the debate)” (Olivola & Todorov, 2010, p. 102). Studies have proven that people make these appearance-based inferences very fast.

As a basis for comparison, another study discovered the following: “Interestingly, when participants could listen to the debate, and hence infer the party affiliation and policy preferences of the candidates, their predictions were at chance” (Olivola & Todorov, 2010, p. 89-90). These findings provide striking evidence that when a politician’s appearance is absent from the decision-making process, voters base their vote on role-relevant information that varies between candidates and it leads to people having less uniformed responses. All of these findings prove voters place role-independent traits over role-relevant traits when they have access to visual media of politicians.

A prime example of voting discrepancy due to the different media format in which a debate was followed is the first 1960 Presidential Debate between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. Those who watched the debate on television saw the unshaven and tired Nixon next to a tanned and rested John F. Kennedy and thought Kennedy had won, while those who followed the political event on radio thought Nixon had won (Mlodinow, 2012). Many historians consider this to be the event that ushered in the trend of Americans placing role-independent traits as more influential than role-relevant traits. Television was still a relatively new phenomenon, and television viewers got to see the difference in appearance between the two candidates. Despite Nixon being older and more experienced, television viewers saw the following: “[Nixon] was exhausted, sweaty and pale. His shirt was one size too big and five shades too light. And after a full day of campaigning, he was tired and anxious, all things a candidate does not

want to be during his first televised presidential debate” (Carmen, C. 2012). The result was that John F. Kennedy, considered by many as the less qualified candidate, was elected into office.

Second, several distinct appearance features can be an advantage or disadvantage for an electoral candidate. Some of these characteristics are summarized in the following quote: “aspects such as a politician’s hair, clothing, posture, and jawline do matter for people who choose based only on appearance” (Spezio, 2012). More specifically, babyfacedness is a facial feature that has implications in how people vote. The following study suggests that, while babyfacedness was negatively correlated with a candidate’s perceived competence, it still had a positive effect on electoral success: “one potential explanation of the positive relationship between babyfaced appearance and electoral success is that babyfaced attributes signal higher approachability and voters are more likely to vote for approachable candidates” (Oliviola & Todorov, 2010, p. 96). However, the effect of babyfacedness varies and can be a disadvantage, as a recent study backs up this claim: “*Slate* correctly predicted that Romney would best Newt Gingrich in the Republican primaries because of Gingrich's soft, round face and Romney's more ‘competent-appearing’ features” (Casil, 2013). Another real-life example is Obama looking uncomfortable during the first 2012 Presidential Debate, as the following study concluded the president’s posture likely had a negative effect on his appearance: “While Obama and Romney appeared to be about the same height during the first debate, the president seemed to be wearing “lift” heels to achieve this effect. His shoes appeared to be bulkier than Romney's and there was something odd about his gait and posture” (Casil, 2013). All of these studies demonstrate that while the perceived attractiveness of a

politician is subjective, there are certain physical traits like babyfacedness and posture that correlate to a positive or negative image projection.

Also, both the gender and the race of a candidate can influence the degree of appearance discrimination he or she receives. A study that emerged after the 2008 election season concluded that when it was evident to the public that female political figures Sarah Palin and Michelle Obama were putting extra emphasis and resources into their appearances, people perceived them as less competent, less moral, and less warm. The results were in stark contrast to how Barack Obama was received, as he received a neutral reaction when it was obvious that he put a substantial effort in his appearance (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2011). The study demonstrates that women are judged more harshly than men over their appearance.

Additionally, it is clearly evident that the race of a political candidate affects people's perceptions. The results from a recent study found that white political candidates were more likely than light-skinned or dark-skinned blacks to be categorized as experienced, while dark-skinned blacks were the most likely of the three groups to be categorized as hardworking. Interestingly enough, light-skinned blacks were the least likely of the three groups to be categorized as intelligent (Weaver, 2012). Furthermore, the same study showed the following: "Conversely, liberal-identifiers were significantly more likely to vote for the dark- skinned black opponent (but not the light-skinned black), and this increase occurred regardless of which platform—liberal or conservative—the opponent had" (Weaver, 2012, p. 184). How darker candidates are perceived is also influenced by the demographics of the voters, as a study concluded the following: "In studies of electoral outcomes, black candidates running for office were most likely to be

supported by women, liberals, racial egalitarians, and Democrats” (Weaver, 2012). Thus, it is evident that race and gender are significant factors in how candidates are perceived in electoral races.

Finally, various forms of media consumption deeply affect the way people perceive candidates. A study measured the effects of television on how low-knowledge voters responded to political candidates when the politician’s attractiveness was increased 10 percent. Those who watched little to no television voted for the attractive candidates 0.8 percent more, while individuals who watched an average amount of television voted 2 percent more for the attractive candidates. Finally, the participants who watched the most television in the study voted for the attractive candidates 4.8 percent more (Lenz & Lawson, 2011). The trend of television influencing the average person to vote for the more attractive candidate is blatantly obvious from the findings above. Researchers have indicated that newspapers also persuade one to five percent of readers (Lenz & Lawson, 2011). YouTube videos of politicians had a negative impact on candidate image evaluations. YouTube videos have the tendency to go “viral” and begin to erode a politician’s image (Dimitrova & Bysrom, 2013). However, a study showed the opposite effect for Facebook. The popular social media network had a positive effect on both intelligence ratings and perceptions of leadership for some political candidates (Dimitrova & Bysrom, 2013). All of these studies clearly demonstrate that various media outlets influence the way political candidates are perceived. All of these involve visual references of candidates, which likely encourage voters to vote for role-independent traits over role-relevant traits.

Solution

It is evident that appearance discrimination is a prevalent yet complex problem in politics. The subjective nature of attractiveness makes it difficult to create a “one size fits all” solution. However, history and the findings in this essay have proven that individuals are far less likely to favor candidates with desirable role-independent traits when being informed in a verbal-only format like the radio. The 1960 Presidential Debate proved to the world that people could make more informed judgments that are more dependent on role-relevant traits when consuming political content over the radio. Thus, I propose that several radio stations be set up around the country by regional location. Each radio station should include only political experts who refrain from discussing a politician’s appearance, personality, and all other relevant role-independent traits. More importantly, these radio stations need to inform the public about a candidate’s role-relevant traits and not engage in the typical political squabbles that define many political talk shows. The political experts on these radio stations need to condense the facts of large political plans and documents into short a five-minute summary. This way, the voters can learn how each candidate’s plans will affect their lives personally, and the emphasis will be informing the voters rather than judging the electoral candidates.

I believe this is a valid solution to an issue that breeds invalid voting behavior. Millions of Americans drive to work everyday and spend a substantial amount of time listening to the radio. I believe that voters want to be informed, yet they simply do not have the energy or the time to do heavy political research to answer questions that they might have on political candidates. Furthermore, I think it’s important that these radio stations should all be managed by one organization that can market its radio product as

the “no-nonsense and straight-forward” zone. The daunting challenge of preventing bias would be solved by selecting only independents to conduct the talk shows. I would recommend that these radio stations also set up YouTube channels to feature short five-minute video clips explaining and detailing the policies of political candidates. However, these videos would not include any visual footage of the political candidates, so the focus remains only on the facts. This is a crucial step for any future organization that desires to set up media outlets that emphasize role-relevant traits, as social media is the gateway to reaching millions of young influential people.

I believe that this could be set up by having a parent non-profit organization manage the various radio stations and YouTube channels. All of the donations received would be invested in supporting the democratic process, and it will persuade voters to believe that these radio stations are more than just political propaganda outlets. They will serve as a neutral arena source of political information that is free of political bias. Many of the authors who worked on the academic journals cited above are all very passionate about the subject of discrimination in politics and have extensive knowledge of the situation. Therefore, I suggest that all of the members on these radio shows should include a mix of individuals who have a Ph.D. in political science or psychology. By bring these experts together who have extensive knowledge of both politics and discrimination, we can provide a truly professional and informative media outlet that serves to encourage voters to focus on judging a candidate based on the role-relevant traits of politicians.

In conclusion, I believe that appearance discrimination exists due to a combination of generations-long historical stereotypes, basic biological responses and the

intense focus the media places on the appearance of politicians. While it is likely that the two former causes cannot be eliminated completely, the latter cause is easily fixable by setting up organizations that communicate to voters by taking advantage of verbal-focused media outlets. This solution will shift the focus to the role-relevant qualities of the politicians and make it easier for the general public to make an informed voting decision. It worked in 1960, and there's no reason it cannot work today.

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