The Influence of Gender and Attractiveness on Evaluations of Political Candidates

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Abstract

This study was designed to examine the effects of gender and level of attractiveness of political candidates on voters’ evaluation of the candidates. Participants ($N = 21$) viewed 20 political representatives’ photographs in a PowerPoint slide show and rated the candidates’ level of kindness, morality, competence for the position, and overall electability. We selected the political candidates in order to create a 2 (gender: male versus female) x 2 (attractiveness: low versus high) design. Male candidates received more positive evaluations than female candidates ($p = 0.03$), which was consistent with past research indicating a preference for males in politics. Attractive candidates, both male and female, were more positively evaluated than unattractive candidates ($p = 0.01$). The significant main effect for attractiveness counters the past research indicating a “beauty is beastly” phenomenon where attractiveness can be detrimental to women seeking high status positions.
The Influence of Gender and Attractiveness on Political Candidates’ Perceived Competence

Attractiveness is an asset in our beauty driven society. Physically attractive people have higher ratings of employment suitability in a wide array of occupations (Tews, Stafford, & Zhu, 2009). Attractive people also have higher starting salaries and more salary increases over their career (Frieze, Olson, & Russell, 1991). Attractiveness helps people move up the socio-economic ladder better than if the people were unattractive. Attractiveness also is more important when the occupation has high social contact (Tews, Stafford, & Zhu, 2009). With careers that have little emphasis on interaction with others, such as a computer scientist, attractiveness is not as essential. However, a career in public relations greatly increases the need to be attractive to excel. Another example of a career area with high social contact is politics.

In politics, attractiveness is important for one’s public image. Politicians become very concerned with their public image because it determines whether or not they get elected to their potential office. Therefore, politicians have a heightened sensitivity to other people’s view of them. A politician’s attractiveness could impact the voter’s view of their competence for the office. Olivola and Todorov (2010) showed participants images of actual political candidates’ faces. These were presented for a duration of 100 milliseconds for each face. They showed participants images of candidates that were competing against one another in actual elections. The participants made judgments of the candidates’ competence and who they would vote for in an election. Participants’ ratings matched actual election outcomes more so than chance with them matching approximately 68% of the time. When rating candidate’s competence for the position, the competence ratings do correspond with the candidate’s ratings of electability (Todorov, Mandizodza, Goren, & Hall, 2005).
Attractiveness impacts the first impressions people form about political candidates. Much of the past research on political candidates has been concerned with males, without mentioning females. One possible reason for this is because men greatly outnumber women in political positions. In the 2004 Congress, only 16% of the representatives were female (Smith, Paul, & Paul, 2007). Even though female representation is low, it has increased significantly over the past couple of decades. Recently, there were 79 female representatives in Congress, which is more than any time in history (BY THE NUMBERS, 2007). Women still face obstacles in getting elected, which is why there is not equal representation of men and women in political offices. Sexism has not been eradicated in our society. In a study by Smith, Paul, and Paul (2007), they ascribed a male or female name to a resume for a political position and had participants evaluate the individual for the job. The male candidate was still preferred over the female. In addition, there was a greater preference for males when the position was a higher status political position, such as the president.

Gender stereotypes contribute to judgments about the political candidates. Women can face gender stereotypes that could deem them less fit for the male-dominated professions. If a woman is attractive, she could exude a feminine presence, which could elicit gender stereotypes. Attractiveness may then not be as much of an asset for females as it is for males when competing in politics. If a woman is attractive, she may be considered more feminine and less competent for the male-dominated role. Sigelman, Thomas, and Sigelman (1986) found that attractiveness was less consistently an asset for female political candidates. On the other hand, attractiveness was always an asset for males, with attractive males being seen as having more masculine traits and being more competent for the position. Another study that demonstrates that attractiveness may not be beneficial for women is a study by Johnson, Podratz, Dipboye, and Gibbons (2010). In
this study, they found a “beauty is beastly” effect for women in higher status positions. This indicates that a woman’s attractiveness could hinder her from reaching higher status positions because they would not be seen as possessing the masculine traits associated with success in those higher status positions.

These studies lead us to our research question for our study. We wondered whether attractiveness would be as advantageous for female political candidates as it is with male political candidates. Can attractiveness actually harm a female political candidate’s chances of being elected to office? We expected that attractive female candidates would have the lowest competence ratings because of the “beauty is beastly” effect for women in high status positions. In contrast, attractive males would have the highest competence ratings because they would be seen as more masculine and fit for the position. We also expected that males would have overall higher ratings of competence that females, regardless of attractiveness, because sexism still exists with males being preferred for political occupations.

To test our hypothesis, participants viewed a PowerPoint slideshow of 20 political candidates’ photographs. They rated the candidates on a 7-point Likert scale for their level of kindness, morality, competence, and electability. They then completed a demographic questionnaire with questions about their political preferences. Afterwards, the participants were debriefed and dismissed.
Method

Participants

Our participants \((N = 21)\) were obtained via a convenience sample of undergraduate students at Hanover College. 72.6\% of the participants \((n = 16)\) were female, and 23.8\% of the participants \((n = 5)\) were male. The mean age of the participants was 20.7 years old, and the ages ranged from 19 to 22 years old. 95.2\% of the participants \((n = 20)\) were Caucasian with one participant being African American. 81.0\% of the participants \((n = 17)\) reported being registered voters. When asked their political party affiliation, 9 participants identified as Independent, 7 identified as Democrat, and 5 identified as Republican.

Materials

For the experiment, the researchers chose 20 political candidates’ photographs from states other than Indiana. We chose states other than Indiana so that the participants would be less likely to be familiar with that political candidate. The photographs were obtained from http://house.gov/. There were 10 photographs of male candidates, and 10 photographs of female candidates. The researchers split up the candidates into attractive and unattractive categories, so that there were 5 attractive and 5 unattractive candidates for each gender. To reduce any confounding variables with attractiveness, the researchers tried to have a homogenous sampling of candidates. Therefore, the candidates were all middle-aged and Caucasian. All of their photographs were professionally taken and were from the chest up.

After forming a Power point slideshow of the 20 candidates, the researchers formulated questions for evaluating the candidates. There were 5 questions for each of the 20 candidates, which were answered on a 7-point Likert scale. The questions were about the following traits of
the candidates: level of kindness, risk-taking, morality, competence for the position, and electability. Some of the other questions were used to assess which personality factors may go into candidates’ electability for that position.

Procedure

Participants came into the computer lab and signed an informed consent form. They then sat at a computer with the Power point slide show of the candidates, and were given a sheet of the 5 questions on the 7-point Likert scale to answer for each of the 20 candidates. When they were finished answering all of the questions for each of the candidates, they were given a questionnaire that asked about basic demographics, voter registration, party affiliation, and their political ideology on a 6-point conservatism-liberalism scale. When they completed this questionnaire, they were debriefed, thanked for their participation, and dismissed.

Results

We ran reliability analyses on our 5 questions that were used to evaluate the candidates. We found a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.7 or higher for all of the questions, besides our question on the level of risk-taking of the candidate. This question was unrelated to the other questions, so we omitted it from our analyses.

The pattern of results we expected to find from our hypotheses was that males would have more positive evaluations than females. We also expected that attractive male candidates would have the most positive evaluations, while attractive female candidates would have the least positive evaluations. To analyze our data, we ran a 2 (attractiveness: low versus high) x 2 (gender: female versus male) within-subjects ANOVA. We found that males received significantly higher positive evaluations ($M = 4.65$) than females ($M = 4.45$), $F(1, 20) = 5.33$, $p =$
0.03. In addition, we found a significant main effect for attractiveness, $F(1, 20) = 8.13, p = 0.01$. Attractive candidates scored significantly higher positive evaluations ($M = 4.82$) than unattractive candidates ($M = 4.28$), regardless of the candidate’s gender. We found no significant interaction between attractiveness and gender, $F(1, 20) = 0.69, p = 0.42$. (See Figure 1)

![Figure 1. Evaluation of the candidates based on attractiveness and gender. Error bars correspond to the 95% Confidence Interval.](image)

**Discussion**

Our hypothesis was partially supported by a significant main effect for gender, which indicated that males scored significantly higher ratings of competence than females. However, our hypothesis was not supported by the significant main effect for attractiveness, which indicated that attractiveness was always beneficial, regardless of one’s gender. Our results demonstrate some interesting findings that are applicable to the world of politics.

First of all, the significant main effect for gender supports the idea that sexism still exists in politics. Men are still seen as more competent for political positions than women. In our study,
most of our participants were female. This is interesting because we would expect that females would support other females, but this was not the case. This suggests that we are all bound by stereotypes and sexist attitudes, even if we are part of the disadvantaged, stereotyped group. In order for sexist attitudes to cease, one has to see more females in political positions, so our views of males being more fit for the position will not be as engrained in our minds. This demonstrates Alice Eagly’s (1987) social role theory, which states that if the gender representation in a role changes, the traits associated with that role will change as well. Therefore, as female representation increases in political positions, typically feminine traits could be more positively associated with the political role, and women could be viewed as more competent for the role.

In addition, our hypothesis was not supported by the main effect for attractiveness that we found. We anticipated that being an attractive female would bring feminine-typed characteristics to mind that would be less fit for a political candidate. In contrast, we expected that unattractive females would not exude as much femininity because of less attractive features, so they could be viewed as better fit for politics. Contrary to our hypothesis, our data showed that being attractive is always favorable, regardless of gender. This phenomenon could be due to the halo effect. This effect is a mental shortcut that we use, which is often a systematic error. We assume that if a person is positive in one way, they will be positive in all other ways (Nisbett, & DeCamp Wilson, 1977). This applies to attractive political candidates. If a candidate is attractive, we may think they have all other positive attributes as well. Verhulst, Lodge, and Lavine (2010) looked at the past research by Olivola and Todorov in which candidates were evaluated by a 100 millesecond duration of an image of a candidate’s face. They explained Olivola and Todorov’s results by stating that candidates could be evaluated more favorably by a halo effect. When participants saw attractive candidates’ faces, they assumed candidates possessed favorable
personality traits as well. This also explains how the questions we asked about the candidates’ traits were inter-related. When candidates were rated as high in kindness, they were also high in morality, competence, and electability. According to the halo effect, people want to assume that people have a consistent personality, with possessing all positive traits or all negative traits. This can have negative implications in how we assess political candidates because we can suppose that they are all positive or all negative in character, and ignore relevant information about the candidate’s ability to be in the political office.

Furthermore, there were some limitations in our study. One limitation was in our small, homogeneous sample. Most of the participants were Caucasian and from the Midwest. Therefore, if we had a more ethnically diverse sample, the sample could have had a different pattern of results because all of our candidates we chose were Caucasian. Also, our sample did not have many males. This made gender comparisons of our participants very difficult. Another limitation is in the candidates that we chose. When searching for photographs of male candidates, the majority of photographs were of older males. This made our sample of male photographs older than the sample of female photographs. This age difference could be a confounding variable. Males could have received higher competence ratings because they were older. If a person is older, they could have more experience in the job area and have a higher status. Lastly, a limitation is that attractiveness is somewhat subjective. When choosing candidates, we did not always agree if a candidate would be categorized as attractive or unattractive. Therefore, we could have created some error in our disagreements on the attractiveness of the individual candidates.
In sum, if we were to replicate this study, we would include more males and ethnicities of participants to have more generalizable results. We would ideally have an equal number of male and female participants, so that we could observe possible gender differences in preferences for candidates. We would also try to eliminate age as a confounding variable with the candidates by finding a greater number of older female candidates or younger male candidates to balance out the age differences. In the future, we would also like to further examine how attractiveness may impact perceptions of competence in politics. We would address more personality traits that may be related to attractiveness and competence. Therefore, we could better understand these significant main effects of attractiveness and gender and what roles these could play in the perception of political candidates when evaluating them for election to the office.
References


