The Looks of a Winner: Beauty and Electoral Success


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Research question

How do quick assessments of beauty and other traits relate to electoral success?
Outline

- Background and motivation
- Our contribution
- Institutional facts
- The survey
- Trait assessments
- Electoral outcomes
- Sensitivity analysis
- Additional surveys
Background and motivation

- Good looks confer advantages

- Beauty premium in the labor market
  - Hamermesh & Biddle, *AER*, 1994

- Looks may be important also in elections
  - Voters are rather uninformed
  - Thin slices of information: beauty as a signal
  - Preference to look at beautiful people

- Emerging empirical literature
“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.”

- Yes, but there is still much agreement: “The meta-analyses showed that, both within and across cultures, people agreed about who is and is not attractive.” (Langlois et al. 2000: 399)

- Our own results confirm this.
Our contribution

- Within-party competition
  - Reverse causality
  - Control for ideology
  - Non-incumbents
- Gender of candidates (and respondents)
- Research design
  - Photos used by parties
  - Different surveys
    - 2,772 Non-Finnish respondents knowing that they assessed politicians (main survey)
    - 3,698 Finnish respondents also knowing this
    - 3,525 Non-Finnish respondents not knowing this
    - 16 Finnish and Swedish respondents assessing all photos
Institutional facts about Finland

- Proportional electoral system with multi-member districts
- 8 parties in Parliament, focus on 4
- Each party has a list of candidates in each district; each voter must choose one candidate on one list
- More equal gender distribution in votes and parliamentary seats than in most countries
The main survey

- 1,929 photos (52 percent male candidates and 48 female)
- An Internet survey
- 2,772 non-Finnish respondents
- Most respondents from the United States (859), Sweden (850), France (261) and Germany (220)
- 66 percent men and 34 women
- 46 percent students
Perceptions, male candidates

Beauty Competence Likability Trustworthiness Intelligence

Male respondents
Female respondents
Perceptions, female candidates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Male Respondents</th>
<th>Female Respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beauty</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
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<td>3.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Likability</td>
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<td>3.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
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<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
<td>3.5</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Comparing male and female candidates

- Male respondents perceive male candidates to be more intelligent and competent than female candidates, and female candidates to be more beautiful, likable and trustworthy.

- Female respondents give more positive assessments of female candidates in all respects.
Empirical specification

- **Dependent variable**: Relative success: \( \frac{p_i}{v_j} \times 100 \) (personal votes / average votes)

- **Traits**:
  - Relative beauty
  - Relative competence
  - Relative trustworthiness

- **Controls**
  - Gender
  - Young (age < 30)
  - Old (age > 60)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1) Relative success all candidates</th>
<th>(2) Relative success all candidates</th>
<th>(3) Relative success all candidates</th>
<th>(4) Relative success female candidates</th>
<th>(5) Relative success male candidates</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beauty</td>
<td>34.89***</td>
<td>31.17***</td>
<td>33.43***</td>
<td>29.85***</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(6.31)</td>
<td>(6.55)</td>
<td>(8.58)</td>
<td>(11.2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
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<td>10.95</td>
<td>5.441</td>
<td>11.70</td>
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<td>(8.61)</td>
<td>(15.6)</td>
<td>(9.88)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
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<td>6.07</td>
<td>15.27</td>
<td>-1.61</td>
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<td>(9.30)</td>
<td>(8.89)</td>
<td>(14.2)</td>
<td>(12.3)</td>
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<td>Male candidate</td>
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<td>-0.05</td>
<td>4.72</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(6.37)</td>
<td>(6.77)</td>
<td>(6.74)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Young (age&lt;30)</td>
<td>-18.93**</td>
<td>-3.93</td>
<td>-16.23*</td>
<td>-18.47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9.45)</td>
<td>(9.54)</td>
<td>(9.70)</td>
<td>(12.4)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old (age&gt;60)</td>
<td>11.59</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>8.19</td>
<td>48.26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(22.5)</td>
<td>(21.8)</td>
<td>(22.3)</td>
<td>(38.5)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of candidates</td>
<td>641</td>
<td>641</td>
<td>641</td>
<td>343</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adjusted R-squared</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

*Note: Robust standard errors in parentheses. The regressions include a constant term. * significant at 10 percent; ** significant at 5 percent; *** significant at 1 percent.*
## Incumbency

|                | Relative success | | Relative success | | | |
|----------------|-----------------|---|-----------------|---|---|
|                | parliamentary election | municipal elections | | | |
| Beauty         | 19.13***        | 17.36**          | (5.82) | (7.74) |
| Competence     | 11.57           | 5.49             | (8.09) | (10.48) |
| Trustworthiness| 6.41            | -0.25            | (6.59) | (12.16) |
| Incumbent      | 190.86***       | 352.91***        | (19.35) | (35.40) |
| Male candidate | -2.57           | -18.33**         | (6.79) | (9.12) |
| Young (age<30) | -19.27**        | -5.49            | (7.61) | (10.08) |
| Old (age>60)   | -14.72          | -9.51            | (18.16) | (17.63) |
| Number of candidates | 743 | 1,043 |
| Adjusted R-squared | 0.36 | 0.39 |
Sensitivity

- Occupation and education
  - In Finland, electoral candidates can report their education and/or occupation on the official party lists that are in voting booths
  - We have collected this information from official party lists for all candidates

- The beauty coefficient is virtually unaffected, both in terms of size and statistical significance, when we include occupational and educational dummy variables
Sensitivity

- Hypothetical election
- Measures based on ordinal assessments
- Specification changes
  - Vote share
  - Redefine incumbency
  - Include five traits
  - Spearman rank correlations for Helsinki
  - Students and non-students
  - Perceived instead of real age
- Beauty matters
Halo effect

- Perceptions on one trait, like beauty, can have halo effects on character-based inferences such as perceived competence.
Additional surveys

- Finnish respondents (#3,698)
- Respondents assessing all photos (#16)
- Respondents without information about the photos (#3,525)

- Main results confirmed in each
- Our approach of collecting responses from outside of Finland turns out to produce more stable results than in collecting data from Finland
Our results

- Beautiful candidates are more successful
- National election: +1 std dev $\Rightarrow +20\%$ votes
- Municipal election: +1 std dev $\Rightarrow +17\%$ votes
- Beauty helps, but it is neither necessary nor sufficient to guarantee electoral success
Inferences of Competence from Faces Predict Election Outcomes

- Authors: Alexander Todorov, Anesu N. Mandisodza, Amir Goren, and Crystal C. Hall
- Groundbreaking article on the effects of appearance in politics
Competence evaluations and US elections

- 600 House elections (2002 and 2004)

Respondents evaluated for each race, which of the two candidates (Democrat and Republican) looked more competent. Order randomized
Well-known candidates

- Races with well-known candidates, like Hillary Clinton, as well as races in the state in which the respondents lived were excluded.
- Photos transformed into black and white, removing replacing any identifiable background, like American flag, with grey.
Respondents

- Princeton undergraduate students
- Different waves of the survey
- The first sample: 74 participants (Senate races in 2000 and 2002)
- The second sample: 127 participants (Senate races in 2004)
- Total number of participants 843
Results

- Competence evaluations based on photos predict the winner in 71.6% of Senate races and 66.8% of House races
Other results

- Antonakis and Dalgas (2009) let Swiss children play a computer-simulated game and choose the captain of their boat from two faces, and they are able predict 71 percent of the outcomes in French elections from the children’s choices.

Faces of Politicians: Babyfacedness Predicts Inferred Competence but Not Electoral Success

- Authors: Panu Poutvaara, Henrik Jordahl and Niclas Berggren
Something else in appearance?

- Zebrowitz and Montepare presented a conjecture in Science in 2005 that the findings by Todorov et al. reflect differences in babyfacedness.
- According to them, babyfaced politicians are evaluated to be less competent and fare worse in elections.
- We test whether this is the case.
Babyfacedness and electoral success for men in parliamentary elections

![Graph showing the relationship between babyfacedness and electoral success.](image-url)
Babyfacedness and electoral success for women in parliamentary elections
Babyfaced politicians

- Our result: Babyfacedness predicts inferred competence **but not electoral success**
- Focus not on beauty. But by excluding a prominent alternative conjecture, it strengthens the case for the importance of beauty.
The Right Look

Conservative Politicians Look Better and Voters Reward It

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Panu Poutvaara, University of Munich and Ifo Institute for Economic Research
Good looking children and adults

are judged more positively

are treated better by others

exhibit more positive behaviors and traits
Beauty premium in the labor market
In experiments, attractive people are believed to play more cooperatively, receive higher offers, trusted more, and paid higher.
This paper

- Are there beauty differences between political left and political right?
- Do the effects of beauty differ between political left and political right?
- Study of proportional electoral system in Finland
  - Avoids reverse causality problem from comparing the effect of beauty in one-member districts (parties can be expected to attract better candidates in districts in which they are stronger)
  - Allows studying non-incumbents on whom voters less informed
Perceptions of male candidates, municipal election

- Beauty: P<0.05
- Competence: P=0.25

- Left male candidates
- Right male candidates
Perceptions of female candidates, municipal election

- Beauty
  - Left female candidates: 2.5
  - Right female candidates: 3.0

- Competence
  - Left female candidates: 3.0
  - Right female candidates: 4.0

P < 0.01 for both Beauty and Competence.
Perceptions of male candidates, parliamentary election

![Bar chart showing perceptions of beauty and competence for left male candidates and right male candidates.](chart.png)

- **Beauty:**
  - Left male candidates:
  - Right male candidates:
  - P < 0.01

- **Competence:**
  - Left male candidates:
  - Right male candidates:
  - P < 0.01
Perceptions of female candidates, parliamentary election

![Bar chart showing differences in perceptions of beauty and competence between left and right female candidates.](chart)

- **Beauty**: Left female candidates are perceived to be significantly less beautiful than right female candidates, with a P<0.01.
- **Competence**: Similar trend observed for competence, with a P<0.01 difference.
Beauty difference in Australia

- Data on Australian parliamentary elections
- Politicians on the right are better-looking also in Australia
Alexander Todorov shared his data with us. Based on it, Republicans received more positive ratings in both Congressional and gubernatorial elections.
Also John Antonakis shared his data with us
Based on it, candidates on the right received more positive evaluations also in France
Summary

- Appearance gap in favor of political right in all studied countries
- A pattern to explain
Why politicians on the right look better?

- A simple economic explanation: beautiful people earn more money on the labor market (Hamermesh and Biddle 1994) and are therefore – for selfish reasons – more inclined to oppose redistribution and support parties to the right.

- A more general psychological explanation: good-looking people are more likely to perceive the world as a just place, since they are treated better than others. Therefore, they are likelier to adopt a conservative outlook.
### Relative Success in the Finnish Elections, Non-Incumbents

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beauty</td>
<td>15.40***</td>
<td>15.91***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4.33)</td>
<td>(4.62)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Beauty×Right</td>
<td>15.59*</td>
<td>18.64**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(7.94)</td>
<td>(5.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male dummy</td>
<td>-20.66</td>
<td>-33.84</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(16.32)</td>
<td>(19.31)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male dummy×Right</td>
<td>42.79</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(24.86)</td>
<td>(25.53)</td>
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<td>Unreported dummies</td>
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<td>interacted with Right</td>
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<td>Number of candidates</td>
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<tr>
<td>R-squared</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Municipal elections, non-incumbents

- Beauty premium exists for both left and right candidates, and is considerably larger for right candidates.
- When not controlling for evaluated competence, one standard deviation higher beauty rating increases vote share within party list by 15–16% on the left, and 30–35% on the right.
Parliamentary elections, non-incumbents

- Beauty premium exists for both left and right candidates, and is about the same
- When not controlling for evaluated competence, one standard deviation higher beauty rating increases vote share within party list by 22–24%
Robustness

- Results survive adding controls for education and occupation
- Beauty premium weaker if incumbents included; incumbency dummy much larger
Interpretation

- Municipal elections low-information elections. Therefore, beauty likely to play a bigger role
- Why candidates on the right look better?
  - Sorting?
  - General relationship between looks and political attitudes?
- Why candidates on the right have a larger beauty premium?
  - Beauty as an informational cue on candidate ideology?
  - Alternative explanation expressive voting, but differences between parliamentary and municipal elections do not support this
If voters reward beauty, this gives an electoral edge to parties on the right

Increased role of television benefits political right?