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MIRROR, MIRROR

FACE-OFF

by Ben McGrath

Ben McGrath on what we might see in a candidate's countenance.

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The recent flap over a doctored photograph released by the mayoral campaign of Virginia Fields, in which two Asian faces were superimposed on white ones, offers another little chunk of evidence for the case that, in politics, image is everything. At issue, ultimately, is whether it would have been more ethical for Fields, the Manhattan borough president, to have staged a live photo-op with multi-ethnic supporters at her side, instead of simply Photoshopping them in.

Yet maybe worrying about who is pictured *with* the candidate is missing the point, imagewise. According to a new study published in *Science*, first impressions of candidates' own faces may well be the determining factor in most elections. Specifically, what voters seem to be looking for—and discerning, in as little as a second—is an indication of competence, as distinct from attractiveness or trustworthiness or intelligence. The study was designed by a Princeton psychology professor named Alexander Todorov, who analyzed several hundred recent congressional races. He found that simply by flashing a pair of head shots before subjects' eyes, and asking them to identify the face that displayed the most competence, he could predict winners with about seventy-per-cent accuracy.

But is competence revealed in the cheekbones, the jawline, the fullness of the lips? An article that accompanied Todorov's study, written by Joann M. Montepare and Leslie Zebrowitz, the author of "Reading Faces: Window to the Soul?," suggests an answer: voters perceive "baby-facedness" (broad cheeks, small chin, big eyes) as a sign of incompetence, whereas "facial maturity" (jutting chin, furrowed brow, angular nose) connotes capability. "When images of former U.S. presidents Reagan and Kennedy were morphed to increase baby-facedness," the article says, "their perceived dominance, strength, and cunning decreased significantly." Joe Lieberman's crags and Arnold Schwarzenegger's squared-off mug, in other words, bode well; the billowing chins of Al Sharpton and the cherubic cheeks of John Edwards do not. The implications are far-reaching. Did Silvio Berlusconi's face-lift, for instance, do him any good? And what should we make of the John Kerry Botox rumors?

Here in New York the mayoral election looms. Granted, there are probably more electoral-prediction models by now than candidates for public office, and it's a safe bet that Michael Bloomberg will be reelected without consulting any of them. From a scientific perspective, however, the Democratic primary race presents a reasonable test case for the Todorov approach, which is best suited for candidates with a low recognition factor.

So Professor Todorov, who has a boyish, if not babyish, face, sat down the other day, in a

Brooklyn café, and was presented with four photographs: Representative Anthony Weiner (lean, pronounced nose, square jaw), City Council Speaker Gifford Miller (pale, plump-cheeked), the former Bronx borough president Freddy Ferrer (glasses, mustache), and Fields (black, full-faced). He recognized only Ferrer, the current front-runner. “They’re so young,” he said, glancing at the others. (Weiner is forty, Miller is thirty-four, and Fields is fifty-nine.) Young, as in resembling a baby? Todorov expressed some reservations about the scientific rigor being employed. And he said that he didn’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings.

“Well, he is the most masculine,” the professor said, pointing at the scowling photograph of Weiner. Then, looking at Miller and his softer features, he shrugged. “He looks competent to *me*.” Whatever the case, neither candidate’s physiognomy has helped much at the polls: Weiner and Miller have been jostling between third and fourth place for months.

Although Fields is polling second, she suffers, facially speaking, from a handicap: according to the Zebrowitz and Montepare article, “A woman’s facial anatomy tends to be more neotenous” —meaning, in a sense, larval—“than a man’s, which may be a drawback for women when vying for leadership positions.”

Ferrer presents another interesting case, because, although he does have full, rosy cheeks, it is impossible to ignore that mustache—a sign of maturity or of insecurity? (“You can disguise your basic facial structure with facial hair,” Zebrowitz said last week.) Some commentators have said that he resembles Groucho Marx, which may not augur well for his perceived competence.

Late last week, one of the beheaded people from the doctored Fields-campaign photo spoke up on behalf of his own face, which, as it happens, falls unambiguously into the “baby-faced” category. The man, whose name is Johnny Rivera, initially wondered why Fields’s people had replaced his head with another man’s. “Am I not that attractive?” he asked. “I’ve been told on numerous occasions that I have a face you can trust. It always annoyed me, as a teen-ager growing up in New York City, in the housing projects, that I looked like a, quote unquote, good boy. I wanted to look mean and tough.”