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HEALTH & FITNESS

What's in That Face? A Candidate's Future

By **NICHOLAS BAKALAR** (NYT) 618 words

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Even though voters often cite competence as a political candidate's most desirable quality, their decisions about which candidates are competent and which are not can rest on as little as a quick glance at a photograph, researchers are reporting.

Moreover, this quick inference can be used to accurately predict the results of an election, according to the study, published in the June 10 issue of *Science*.

"We have found that these judgments occur extremely quickly and are highly automatic," said Crystal Hall, a graduate student in psychology and a co-author of the study.

She added, "Based on that finding, it is hard to say whether or not one could truly avoid the influence" of these first impressions.

In their test, researchers paired photographs of opposing candidates from the 2002 and 2004 Congressional elections and showed them to Princeton undergraduates, giving them as little as one second to decide which candidate was more competent. Highly familiar faces were excluded.

In 71.6 percent of the Senate races, the candidate considered more competent in the one-second test won. That means, the researchers said, that the test was as good a predictor of the outcome of an election as a candidate's incumbency.

The test was somewhat less successful in predicting elections for the House of Representatives, where 66.8 percent of the candidates who were considered more competent won.

Subjects were also asked to judge the candidates' honesty and likability, but only judgments of competence predicted victory or defeat.

Why competence alone stands out as a predictive factor is not known. The authors theorize that rapid judgments of competence based on looks, however irrationally arrived at, can prejudice subsequent thoughts about a candidate's other qualifications.

The researchers do not know exactly which facial features make people infer competence. Simply asking probably would not help, said Dr. Alexander Todorov, the lead author on the study. "People's reports of what facial features they consider as affecting their judgments are not very reliable," he said, and in order to get the right answer, a

researcher would have to experimentally manipulate facial features while asking subjects for their responses.

Nevertheless, an editorial accompanying the study suggests that looking babyish harms a candidate's chances. Both babies and baby-faced adults share certain characteristics: round faces, large eyes, small noses, high foreheads, and small chins. No one trusts the competence of a baby, and few, apparently, trust that of an adult who looks like one.

The authors conclude that people may be less rational in their voting decisions than they think. If the one-second test is accurate in determining competence, they report, it may function well as a decision-making technique. Unfortunately, no good evidence suggests that inferences drawn from a person's facial appearance can predict character or skills.

That may offer a bleak picture of voter decision making, Dr. Todorov said, adding that he still sees some hope that voters may consider something other than looks in selecting their leaders.

"Appearance alone is not enough to get one into office," he said. "There were races in which the candidate who won was overwhelmingly perceived as looking less competent than the other candidate. In these cases, the voters knew what they were voting for."

Photos: Senator Russell G. Feingold, left, Democrat of Wisconsin, and Tim Michels, his opponent. (Photo by Science)

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