Lose the election? Whom to blame?

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Taking politicians purely at "face value" can frequently predict their success in elections, according to a study by Princeton researchers published in the June 10 issue of *Science*.
Participants asked to choose which political candidate in a race seemed more competent — based solely on the candidates' photos — accurately predicted the outcome of 71.6 percent of U.S. Senate races in 2000, 2002 and 2004.
Despite the age-old admonition not to "judge a book by its cover," we routinely make important judgments about human traits based on instant, superficial impressions of peoples' faces.

The findings suggest that fast, unreflective decisions can contribute to voting choices, which are widely assumed to be based primarily on rational and deliberate considerations, the researchers said.

"The findings are striking — I didn't believe them at first," said Alexander Todorov, assistant professor of psychology and public affairs . "I think that a lot of inferences that we make about other people are fairly automatic and can even occur outside of conscious awareness. The catch is that these inferences can influence important deliberate decisions."

The evaluations of the candidates were derived solely from facial appearance. Participants were shown black-and-white headshots of two candidates in 95 Senate races. If a participant recognized either candidate, the data were excluded.

Races involving highly familiar candidates such as Hillary Clinton and Richard Gephardt also were excluded. Across all studies, participants were 843 undergraduate and graduate students at Princeton. However, judgments from as few as 40 participants were sufficient to reliably predict the outcomes of the Senate races.

The study also asked participants to look at photos of candidates in 600 U.S. House races in 2002 and 2004. In those races, the candidates who were deemed more competent won the election 66.8 percent of the time.

In a review of the study, Dr. Leslie Zebrowitz, a psychologist at Brandeis University, and Joann M. Montepare, explain that the outcomes of the political races were likely due to differences in the opponents' "babyfacedness."

"Although the study doesn't tell us exactly what competence is – there are many kinds, including physical strength, social dominance and intellectual shrewdness – babyfaced people are perceived to be lacking in all these qualities," said Zebrowitz, a pioneering research scientist in the field of facial impressions and author of "Reading Faces: Window to the Soul?"

What facial qualities make someone look more babyfaced and less competent? Zebrowitz says that both babies and babyfaced adults, regardless of sex or ethnicity, share such features as a round face, large eyes, small nose, high forehead and small chin. Competency, on the other hand, is associated with facial maturity.

"The association between facial maturity and perceived competence is ubiquitous: babyfaced individuals within various demographic groups are perceived as less competent…Its impact can be seen even for famous politicians: in another study, when images of U.S presidents Reagan and Kennedy were morphed to increase babyfacedness, their perceived

dominance, strength and cunning decreased significantly," writes Zebrowitz in the magazine's "Perspectives" column.

She says that the evolutionary importance of detecting attributes such as emotion, age and health is probably responsible for our strong tendency to respond to facial qualities that reveal these characteristics. With this built-in predisposition, we tend to overgeneralize facial impressions to adults whose faces, in this case, merely resemble a baby's in certain features. The result: we often conclude that babyfaced adults are naïve, submissive and weak.

In fact, studies by Zebrowitz and others have shown that babyfaced men are actually more intelligent, better educated, more assertive and apt to win more military medals than their mature-looking counterparts.

Research in the area of facial impressions has implications for political marketing, social decision-making and even the democratic process, Zebrowitz believes. "The data we have suggest that we're not necessarily electing better leaders – people who are actually more competent, though we are electing people who look the part."

In addition, the researchers asked participants to make judgments based on the photos on a variety of other traits, including attractiveness, honesty, trustworthiness, charisma, likeability, extroversion and agreeableness. Only their judgments on competence accurately predicted the outcome of the elections, the study found.

Todorov, who has been a professor at Princeton since 2002, studies social cognition, judgment and decision making. He conducted the study with Anesu Mandisodza, a former research assistant, and Princeton graduate students Amir Goren and Crystal Hall.

Source: Princeton University / Brandeis University

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