Snap judgments about candidates are the best way to pick winners, study suggests

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People watching short clips of silent debate footage are able to predict political election winners more accurately than predictions based on reports of economic conditions, finds a study supported by Dartmouth, the University of Chicago, Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, and the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research (ISR).

"We found that snap decisions based on charisma are a good predictor of election outcomes," says Daniel J. Benjamin, an assistant professor of economics at Dartmouth and a fellow at ISR. "But you need to measure charisma with silent video clips rather than sound-on clips because knowing about candidate policy positions disrupts people's ability to judge the non-verbal cues that really matter." Benjamin was a co-author of this study with Jesse M. Shapiro of the University of Chicago.

After watching ten-second silent video clips of competing gubernatorial candidates, participants in the study were able to pick the winning candidate at a rate significantly better than chance. When the sound was turned on and participants could hear what the candidates were saying, they were no better than chance at predicting the winner. For the study, Benjamin and Shapiro showed 264 participants, virtually all Harvard undergraduates, ten-second video clips of the major party candidates in 58 gubernatorial elections from 1988 to 2002.

Researchers found that the accuracy of predictions based solely on silent video clips was about the same as or greater than the accuracy of predictions based on knowledge of which candidate was the incumbent

and information about the prevailing economic conditions at the time of the election, including the unemployment rate and any changes in personal income for the year prior to the election.

"The basic finding that adding policy information to visual information about candidates actually worsens voter judgment has some important implications," says Benjamin. "It may help to explain, for example, why expert forecasters, who are highly informed about and attentive to policy matters, have been found to perform no better than chance in predicting elections."

The findings also underscore the importance of charisma as distinct from policy positions or party affiliations in winning elections.

"It may be difficult to describe the factors that determine a politician's charisma," says Benjamin. "But it can be measured by how people react to a politician in the absence of information about policy positions. Our study clearly shows that reactions to even small amounts of visual information are highly informative about charisma."

The research was funded by the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, and by KNP Communications, a political consulting firm that used the findings to develop a tool called the Virtual Primary(™) to help political organizations and donors predict at the beginning of the campaign which candidates would be successful in the end.

Source: Dartmouth College