

A pretty face can make a difference in whom you vote for

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First it was Hillary Clinton, and now Sarah Palin. Everyone is talking about the year the glass ceiling finally cracked, if not shattered, in U.S. politics. According to new Northwestern University research, it is not at all surprising that everyone also is talking about the great looks of vice presidential hopeful Palin.

Whether or not you believe the McCain campaign's \$150,000 expenditure for Palin's wardrobe and the much-talked-about salary of her makeup artist are over the top, the decision to play up the looks of the former beauty queen is a winning strategy.

Even in 2008, a perception of competence -- a strong predictor of whether people will vote for political candidates -- is not enough to give women the winning edge in political contests, according to the new Northwestern psychology study.

For both men and women, female political candidates needed to be seen as attractive as well as competent to get their votes.

"Even female voters seemed to tap into the cultural expectation that women who are attractive as well as competent are more worthy of high status roles," said Joan Y. Chiao, assistant professor of psychology at Northwestern.

While gender bias related to a female candidate's attractiveness was consistent across both male and female voters, good looks was almost all

that mattered in predicting men's votes for female candidates. And, true to prevailing stereotypes, competence was almost all that mattered in predicting men's votes for male candidates.

"Campaign managers seem to be ahead of the game in understanding that image really matters," said Chiao. "They know that, contrary to popular notions, people are not necessarily using deliberate and rational strategies in deciding whom to vote for, especially when it comes to women."

"The Political Gender Gap: Gender Bias in Facial Inference that Predict Voting Behavior" will be published online Oct. 31 by the open-access journal *PLoS ONE*. The study's co-investigators are Chiao, Nicholas E. Bowman, Northwestern University Interdepartmental Neuroscience Program, and Harleen Gill, Smith College Neuroscience Program.

Chiao, who works at one of only two labs in the world dedicated to cultural and social neuroscience, is particularly interested in how social identities related to gender or race modulate the biological process underlying feeling and reason.

Study participants were first shown pictures of congressional candidates from the 2006 election and asked to rate, on a seven-point scale, how competent, attractive, approachable and dominant they were.

Then in a separate task, they were shown a pair of candidates from the 2006 congressional race and asked to choose one of the two for president of the United States.

Overall, voters perceived the faces of male politicians as more competent and dominant relative to female politicians; female politicians were perceived as more attractive and approachable relative to males.

Candidates who were perceived as more attractive by men were more likely to win votes in the actual Congressional election, Chiao noted.

Gender stereotypes may bias voters to value male politicians over female politicians simply because they possess facial features that signal qualities associated with effective leaders, according to the study.

"Given the research showing that men and women essentially do not differ in leadership effectiveness, voters' perception of male politicians as more competent than female politicians is likely driven by lingering cultural stereotypes," Chiao said.

According to predominant gender stereotypes, men are more likely to be assertive and take control of situations, whereas women are expected to be nurturing in interpersonal contexts.

"We think these gender stereotypes affect the extent to which male and female political candidates are going to be perceived as competent, dominant, attractive and approachable," Chiao said.

In another twist of the research, female voters were more likely to vote for male politicians who appeared approachable as well as competent. The study suggests that the reason women care about approachability in male candidates has to do with evolutionary biases related to mate selection.

In other words, women relate approachability in men with reproductive success. Drawing on the same type of emotional response, they may relate approachability in male politicians with the ability to lead people in and out of war.

The study addresses the perplexing question of why so few women are represented in the majority of political offices around the world,

particularly at the highest echelons of government.

As women become an increasingly visible presence in electoral politics and government, the article concludes, voters may learn to reduce their reliance on cognitive shortcuts, or gender stereotypes, in assessing female political candidates.

Source: Northwestern University

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