On the face of it, voting's superficial

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Are voters truly sophisticated and rational decision makers? Apparently not. Their choices are heavily influenced by superficial, nonverbal cues, such as politicians' appearance, according to Christopher Olivola from University College London in the UK and Alexander Todorov from Princeton University in the US. According to their findings, voters make judgments about politicians' competence based on their facial appearance and these appearance-based competence judgments reliably predict both voting decisions and election outcomes. The research is published in the June 2010 issue of the *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*.

The researchers also discuss the potential impact of these judgments on actual voters and show that appearance is most likely to influence less knowledgeable voters who watch a lot of television, a finding consistent with psychological models of persuasion.

Research to date suggests that rapid judgments about the [personality traits](#) of political candidates, based solely on their appearance, can predict their electoral success. In other words, voters rely heavily on appearances when choosing which candidate to elect. Since voters need to navigate their way through the flood of information available about candidates in order to make fully informed choices, it is no surprise that they take mental shortcuts to get to their final decision.

After reviewing the published literature on this topic, the authors then introduce a [computer model](#) of facial personality traits to identify the particular [facial features](#) associated with competence judgments. By manipulating the degree of competence of faces on a screen, they are

able to show that facial maturity and physical attractiveness are the two main criteria used by participants to make competence judgments.

Olivola and Todorov conclude: "Getting people to overcome the influence of first impressions will not be an easy task. The speed, automaticity, and implicit nature of appearance-based trait inferences make them particularly hard to correct. Moreover, often people don't even recognize that they are forming judgments about others from their appearances."

So how should the impact of appearances in politics be mitigated? According to the authors: "Controlling exposure to television and other media would be extremely difficult, so educating voters is likely to be a more realistic strategy."

More information: Olivola CY & Todorov A (2010). Elected in 100 milliseconds: appearance-based trait inferences and voting. Journal of Nonverbal Behavior. DOI:10.1007/s10919-009-0082-1

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