

What we want to see on TV: Handsome politicians

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The better the looks of United States Congresspersons, the more television coverage they receive, shows a new study from the University of Haifa recently published in the journal *Political Communication*. The reason behind this? Television journalists think their viewers prefer to see physically attractive people. "Physical appearance ranked third in the criteria for gaining television coverage, and ranked higher than seniority, position in Congress and legislative activity in this respect," noted the authors of the study.

The study, conducted by University of Haifa researchers, Dr. Israel Waismel-Manor of the School of Political Science and Prof. Yariv Tsfati of the Department of Communication, asked 463 Israeli students to rank the [physical attractiveness](#) of Members of the 110th United States Congress (2007) based on the official photographs posted on Congress's website. The authors chose that year for its distance from elections, which could otherwise influence media coverage. Israeli students were chosen for this, so as to eliminate the possibility of [biases](#) stemming from political views or previous knowledge of Congresspersons, both of which could influence an objective judgment of physical attractiveness. So as to determine that the Israeli assessment of 'good looks' is not culturally different from the American judgment, the researchers compared the Israeli ranking to a ranking given by 30 American students, to find a very high correlation between the two. Furthermore, to eliminate other possible biases, the researchers did not include in the survey politicians who were running for president, nor the Speaker of the House and the majority and minority leaders in the House

and Senate. Features that affect media coverage, such as seniority in Congress, political standing (committee assignment and prestige), electoral [invulnerability](#), [political ideology](#), legislative and overall activity, communication effort (press releases), chamber of Congress, media markets, state size, age, gender and race were all controlled for this study.

The authors defined media coverage as an article or item that appeared during 2007 in which a particular Member of Congress speaks or is quoted. [Television coverage](#) was surveyed from the national television networks (ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, NBC and PBS). The radio coverage measure was comprised of all NPR news radio programs, while the newspaper measure includes all articles that appeared in USA Today, front to back.

The study shows that physical attractiveness has an effect on television exposure: the better looking the politician, the more TV coverage he or she gains. Yet no significant effect was found for radio or printed [news coverage](#). Following congresspersons' congressional activity and their state's size, physical attractiveness is the third strongest predictor of TV coverage, scoring slightly higher than chamber of Congress, gender, tenure in office, bills sponsored and political standing. After weighting the various factors playing into media exposure, the study found that for every additional score on the 'physical attractiveness index' (a scale of 1 to 10), the politician's television exposure rises by 11.6%.

The researchers have also managed to identify the possible mechanism underlying the attractiveness effect on news coverage. Earlier studies, the researchers explain, have suggested three possible reasons why good looks may effect media exposure: 1. that television journalists believe their viewers want to see beautiful people; 2. that good looks broadcast reliability and respectability, which are highly regarded attributes for journalists, leading them to interview better-looking individuals over

others; and 3. that good looks heighten a politician's self-confidence and subsequently these politicians invest more efforts in achieving media exposure.

"The fact that we found no connection between the Member of Congress's media efforts and his or her television coverage rules out the third explanation. The data demonstrated that better-looking people tend to be more media-active, but at the end of the day it does not make a marked difference. The second explanation was also inconsistent with our current results. Had attractive people received more coverage because they were more trustworthy or eloquent (or because they were perceived to possess these characteristics), they should have received more news coverage on the radio and in the newspaper as well, not only on television. The fact that the association between physical attractiveness and news coverage was significant only for television news, and not for radio and print, favors the first explanation mentioned above, that television journalists cover better-looking Congresspersons in order to attract the attention of audiences," said Prof. Tsfati and Dr. Waismel-Manor.

Provided by University of Haifa

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