

Being attractive helps, but it isn't everything

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The question may be as old as democracy itself: are physically attractive people elected more often than less attractive opponents? In two studies that were published recently, Dr. Sebastian Jäckle from the University of Freiburg's Department of Political Science, his colleague Thomas Metz, from the same department and the political scientists from the Technical University of Kaiserslautern, Prof. Dr. Georg Wenzelburger and Dr. Pascal König, have found out that looking good can at least partly explain success in elections. "However, a candidate's party affiliation still has the biggest impact on a voter's decision," Sebastian Jäckle adds.

In their first study which was published in the *Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen* the scientists proved that direct candidates in the 2017 Bundestag elections benefited from attractive looks as well as competent appearance in photographs. In real terms, the model shows that an individual who is rated as more attractive than their immediate local competitor by all the participants in the study can gain an advantage of 3.8 percentage points. "The positive aspect of attractiveness may be the strongest, however direct candidates who are rated as more competent also do significantly better than those who are seen to be less competent," Jäckle stresses. On the other hand, appearing more likeable is not of notable advantage.

The second study looked at the same issue during the United States House of Representatives elections. "The effect of appearance is more extreme in the US on account of the strong personalization of political life. Appearance influences choice of Congressional candidates far more severely: up to eleven percentage points can be gained on account of appearance alone," says the [political scientist](#) about the main finding of his study "A Catwalk to Congress" which has been published in *American Politics Research*.

Based on two earlier studies, Sebastian Jäckle and the team investigated whether the importance of the three characteristics attractiveness, likeability and perceived competence changed between the 2013 and 2017 Bundestag elections. "We wanted to find out whether the effects observed in 2013 have changed, what characteristics in appearance are especially powerful, and whether they have a stronger effect under specific conditions," says Jäckle. The results show that the effect of attractiveness has risen markedly in 2017 in comparison to the previous [election](#), and electoral behavior in Germany has therefore become more like that in the US. In addition, the analyses indicate that in certain types of electoral district appearance is more important than in others. In electoral districts where two men are opposing one another it tends to be less important. However, if a woman receives the direct mandate, whether against another woman or a man, rating of appearance tends to have a greater influence.

To gather their data, both studies used online surveys in which participants were presented with 30 pairs of candidates who have competed against one another in a real electoral district before. Under [time pressure](#), the participants had to state intuitively which of the two candidates they found more attractive, competent and likeable. "Unlike the common practice of drawing on relatively small groups of students for such ratings, both studies drew on a far larger and more diverse sample of 700 and 5,400 people respectively," Jäckle emphasizes.

The political scientist fully believes the results of the study have practical relevance because "it is comparatively easy to influence attractiveness and competence ratings by changing one's [appearance](#)." For instance, wearing spectacles or jewelry, a certain hairstyle or make-up, and using a professional photographer for the election campaign could be worthwhile. "This alone could help to gain one or two additional percentage points in some electoral districts—which can certainly make the difference between winning and losing."

More information: Sebastian Jäckle et al, A Catwalk to Congress? Appearance-Based Effects in the Elections to the U.S. House of Representatives 2016, *American Politics Research* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/1532673X19875710](https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X19875710)

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