

Can you judge trustworthiness based on looks? New research says no

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A new study from Rice University political scientist Rick Wilson and Texas A&M economist Catherine Eckel has examined the topic of trustworthiness. The article, titled "Attributions of Trust and

Trustworthiness," will appear in an upcoming edition of *Political Behavior*.

"In 2001, George W. Bush proclaimed that he looked into Vladimir Putin's eyes and found the Russian leader to be 'trustworthy,'" the authors wrote. "Many people claim to be able to read their counterparts in bargaining settings; there is little doubt that this would be a valuable skill. ... How often do they get it right?"

Not very often.

Using decisions made in experimental [trust](#) games conducted in previous academic studies, Wilson and Eckel asked subjects in the new study to view photos of the people who made those decisions and guess their levels of [trustworthiness](#). Even though subjects were motivated by being paid for correct guesses, they had little accuracy.

Wilson said incorrect guesses were tied to distinctive [characteristics](#).

"We found that subjects were influenced by [stereotypes](#) based on the features seen in the photos, including gender, skin color or attractiveness," he said. "Our results revealed that people are fooling themselves when they think they can predict trustworthiness from appearance alone."

So do Wilson and Eckel believe it when world leaders claim they can judge trustworthiness just by meeting face to face?

"We're skeptical," they concluded in the paper. "While people are confident in their ability to quickly read the [faces](#) of others, they rarely do better than chance."

More information: Rick K. Wilson et al, *Attributions of Trust and*

Trustworthiness, *Political Behavior* (2023). DOI: [10.1007/s11109-022-09855-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-022-09855-6)

Provided by Rice University

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