WHAT'S YOUR BIAS?

THE SURPRISING SCIENCE OF WHY WE VOTE THE WAY WE DO

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logical: a snap judgement – the kind you make in the blink of an eye.

Let's take one very famous example of how appearances matter: the first televised presidential debate in the USA between one-term senator Democrat John F. Kennedy and Eisenhower's vice-president and seasoned campaigner Republican Richard Nixon.

The decision even to broadcast this debate was extremely controversial at the time. Newspapers were the home of politics, whereas TV was considered a medium of entertainment. Journalist Theodore H. White warned that putting candidates on the spot on TV risked dumbing down politics altogether: 'Neither man could pause to indulge in the slow reflection and rumination, the slow questioning of alternatives before decision, that is the inner quality of leadership.' Others were concerned that it was a slippery slope that would turn political discourse into some kind of game show: 'If we test Presidential candidates by their talents on TV quiz performances, we will, of course, choose presidents for precisely these qualities,' said University of Chicago historian Daniel Boorstin.

Nevertheless, it went ahead.

The stakes could not have been higher: within the previous four years, Soviet tanks had crushed a democratic revolt in Hungary, the USSR had shocked the world

with the successful launch of Sputnik, Fidel Castro had established his revolutionary regime in nearby Cuba, and domestically, the struggle for civil rights was dividing the nation. More than 90 per cent of American homes now had TV sets, and an estimated 70 million people tuned in to the contest.

With the rivals campaigning tirelessly throughout the summer of 1960, Nixon had inched ahead in the polls. Twice vice-president, he hadn't lost an election in over thirty years, and thought he would easily beat the handsome but callow forty-three-year-old Kennedy.

But, arriving at the studios, he banged his knee stepping out of the car (exacerbating an earlier injury), and having recently suffered a bout of the flu, he was still running a low fever. He'd also spent a gruelling day on the campaign trail. 'Nixon looked like warmed-over death. He'd been in the hospital, his color was bad . . . He was not a well man,' recalled CBS president Frank Stanton. And yet, despite this, and despite confessing to Walter Cronkite in an interview two weeks earlier, 'I can shave within thirty seconds before I go on television and still have a beard,' Nixon declined the services of CBS's top make-up artist, who had been summoned from New York for the event. At his aides' urging, Nixon submitted only to a coat of *Lazy Shave*, a pancake make-up he had previously used to mask his five o'clock shadow.

Kennedy on the other hand had spent the day preparing with aides for the debate, and then had a nap. He too turned down the services of CBS's make-up artist, because he already had a perfect tan. Kennedy was more than ready for his close-up.

From the start of the debate it was clear that the young Democrat had found his moment to shine. Calm, knowledgeable and effortlessly handsome, his practice of looking at the camera when answering the questions – and not at the journalists who asked them, as Nixon did – made viewers feel he was talking to them, giving them straight answers. Pale and in pain, Nixon quickly started sweating under the hot studio lights, causing the Lazy Shave powder to melt off his face in beads of sweat, and his sideways glances at the studio clock – that the home audience couldn't see – had the added effect of making him look shifty. So catastrophic was the debate for Nixon that Chicago mayor Richard J. Daley reportedly said, 'My God, they've embalmed him before he even died.' The following day, the *Chicago Daily News* ran the headline 'Was Nixon Sabotaged by TV Makeup Artists?'

The debate is widely recognised as the turning point in Kennedy's campaign. ('It was TV more than anything else that turned the tide,' said Kennedy four days after the election.) And although some of that was because of

what Kennedy said – he spoke with confidence and optimism about the issues that concerned voters – how he looked was certainly a big factor.

We know this because, despite the large viewing figures, many voters still chose to listen to it on the radio. And, while those that watched the debate on TV thought Kennedy was the clear winner, those who listened to the debate on the radio thought Nixon had won. Given how tight the election was – Kennedy won the popular vote 49.7 per cent to 49.5 per cent – this debate remains a fascinating example of the importance of appearance.

As far as experiments go, it's not perfect: it's possible that those listening to the debate on the radio might have been more likely from the start to prefer Nixon – perhaps, say, because they lived in rural areas where television had not yet reached. (Relatively few Catholics – a key Kennedy constituency – lived in the countryside.)

But this isn't the end of the story. In 2003 a researcher called James N. Druckman revisited the debate in an experiment, to find out whether people's opinions really were influenced by what they saw. He randomly assigned people to watch or listen to the recording, and then report on whether they thought Kennedy or Nixon had been more successful. The results were again quite clear: those who watched the debate, rather than listened to it, were much more likely to say they thought Kennedy

won.[1] Something made people think Kennedy had come off better.

Nixon was ill, and he looked ill. But surely we understand that everyone gets ill now and then. If a politician can campaign for months, garnering support from party and public, and fine-tuning their policies, it hardly seems likely that our decision whether or not to vote for them will be based on, for example, the one time they have appeared in public feeling a bit under the weather. Surely that's not a rational way to go about choosing our leaders.

Part of the problem here is the idea of competence.

Competence is extremely important to voters – and rightly so. Of course we want our leaders to be competent! But we don't always come to a decision about competence rationally. In the Kennedy/Nixon example, the visual contrast between the two – and not what they were saying – was enough to give Kennedy a boost.

This is an extreme example. But, in fact, our judgements of 'competence' are often made in the blink of an eye – just by looking at a person's face. And those judgements aren't necessarily accurate.

A psychologist called Alexander Todorov wanted to investigate just how much we are influenced by these snap judgements.[2] He conducted an experiment in which he showed people photos of two politicians, and asked them to say which of the candidates looked more

competent. There weren't any instructions about what 'competent' should mean – the participants had to make their own judgements. The researchers found that people tended to agree about which faces looked more competent. That in itself should give us pause – if most people agree on whether a person is competent, does that mean they are right, and one person really is more competent, or is there something else going on?

But, those questions aside, that's not the only thing the study showed – it turned out that those identified as having a more competent face were also more likely to have actually won an election.

We might think this was just a random quirk of one election or one study, but it's a finding that has been replicated time and time again.[3,4,5] It seems that viewing someone's face for less than a second is enough for people to make a rating of their 'competence' that predicts who will win an election. The predictions aren't entirely accurate obviously, but they are still reliable – they can range from 55 to 70 per cent for different elections.

This would seem to suggest that people are generally agreed upon who looks more competent – and that the favoured candidate tends to win elections. Just from a split-second glimpse at a photograph – it's nothing to do with what they say, or what kinds of policies they promote.

And it's not just that participants are aware of who has won a particular election, and (consciously or otherwise) view successful politicians as more competent. For example, in one study people in the USA were able to correctly guess the winner of elections in Bulgaria.[6] Those in the USA and India were also able to correctly guess electoral success in Mexico and Brazil. Interestingly, this study indicated that the effect might be weaker for incumbent candidates – so when voters know how a candidate has actually performed in office, they're less influenced by how that candidate looks.[7]

This effect does vary across cultures, though. There is some evidence showing that perceived 'competence' is more likely to win you an election in the USA than in some other countries, for example South Korea.[8] And it isn't always possible to predict results in another country. For example, while Japanese and American participants were able to guess who won elections in their own countries, they were less successful when judging the politicians from the other country.[9] In the USA success seemed to be better predicted by how 'powerful' the candidate looked, whereas in Japan perceived 'warmth' was more important.

If there are 'social norms' that influence how we perceive leadership in faces across cultures, it seems that we start to pick up on these very early on in life. In a

wonderfully titled paper in *Science* ('Predicting Elections: Child's Play'),[10] two researchers called John Antonakis and Olaf Dalgas from the University of Lausanne found that even children are able to make judgements that can predict who is likely to win an election. Of course, you can't really ask a five-year-old to rate how 'competent' a face is, so Antonakis and Dalgas instead asked, 'Who would you like to be the captain of your boat?' From the age of five (as young as they tested) to seventy, answers to this question consistently predicted who would win a given election. Whatever it is about a person's face that makes us think they are more competent in our culture, kids seem to be aware of this from as young an age as we can test them.

So what does all this tell us about how we vote?

For starters, it seems to suggest that we are agreed on what competence is, and that's what we want in our leaders. If we are all agreed, does that mean we can actually tell how competent a person is? Or are we getting it wrong somehow?

It might not be unreasonable to assume that we're on to something – in fact, sometimes a snap judgement can tell you more than you might think. It brings to mind another bias – the well-documented 'halo effect', which shows that we have a tendency to assume that people who are more attractive are also more intelligent.[11]

While this assumption might seem naive, some studies have shown that there may be a little bit of truth to it – people rated as 'attractive', on average, do tend slightly to be more intelligent. The reasons why are not clear – for example, perhaps attractive students get more attention in school – and, of course, it doesn't mean that attractive people are *always* more intelligent.

This halo effect does seem to influence elections. A study in Finland asked people to rate a number of faces according to their 'beauty' – that is, according to their own personal standards of beauty – and found that those candidates identified as more beautiful received 20 per cent more votes.[12] (Even scientists seem to be hit by this halo effect, with more attractive scientists being rated as more 'interesting', although, oddly, people don't necessarily think that makes them better scientists.)[13]

Does something similar apply to our perceptions of competence? Sadly, no: there is no evidence that people are actually able to judge from someone's face whether they are more competent (or indeed more able to captain a boat). While we might *agree* – for whatever cultural reasons – on which faces we think are most competent, this particular bias seems to be unfounded – we just can't tell with any accuracy.

That's unlucky for all of those competent politicians out there who just happen to have the wrong kind of

face. Of course there are many other overriding factors that directly influence how we vote, but there seems to be a small but reliable correlation between how we rate their competence in a snap judgement, and how successful they'll be in an election, and the effect of the Nixon/Kennedy debate certainly would support that.

Strictly speaking, there is so far no incontrovertible evidence showing that this bias *directly* affects the way we vote. As with all correlations (such as between ice cream sales and the number of people who drown on a given day), we have to be very careful before saying that one thing really *causes* the other. Actually demonstrating it would be extremely difficult. The only way we could test it with certainty would be for a political party to run a controlled experiment in which they selected equally matched politicians who differed in nothing other than the perceived competence of their faces, and it's unlikely any party would want to take part in such a study. Caveats aside, though, it's certainly striking enough to make us pause and question what kind of biases are behind our decisions when we go to the ballot box.

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Overall, it's very sensible for politicians to be concerned about the way they look – it clearly matters. They can't

necessarily control their faces, but they can control their general appearance.

It goes without saying that many voters will have certain expectations of how politicians present themselves, and their image is often carefully crafted to appeal to their target audience.

But can the way someone dresses – or the way they do their hair – really encourage us to vote for them? It might seem preposterous but, as always, there are interesting psychological studies that can help us to understand what we're seeing in election campaigns and results.

Let's start with what we can tell about a person's politics just from looking at them.

If you were asked to guess whether a politician was left or right wing, just by looking at their face, how accurate do you think you'd be? Surely you can't tell political allegiance based on looks alone? It's highly unlikely that you'd be 100 per cent accurate, but studies have shown that you are indeed more likely to guess correctly than incorrectly.[14]

When I first heard about this finding, I was sceptical. How can we possibly make an accurate snap judgement about something as important as someone's political views, which can take a whole lifetime to develop? So, I set out to replicate this experiment in my own work.

I gathered a collection of portrait photographs of politicians from sixteen different countries (including Canada, the UK and Australia) and showed them to people from various different countries (mainly Belgians, as that's where we were doing the research, but not exclusively). The accuracy was only around 60 per cent – but, with nothing but a picture to go on, and with a spread of different nationalities included, this result is still surprising.

To try to pinpoint the basis on which people were making their judgements, we tried a second experiment to see what would happen if we showed just the 'internal' facial features (eyes, nose and mouth), or if we showed just the 'external' facial features (chin, jawline, hairstyle). We found that people could guess much more accurately when they could see the external features of the face. So even though we still don't know exactly what it is about someone's appearance that allows us to make these judgements, it's likely that a large part of the effect comes from aspects of appearance that people can cultivate, like their hairstyles. (For example, in some cases we might be picking up on a stereotype for a kind of 'right-wing' power hair style – think Margaret Thatcher.)

These are politicians – and their aim is to appeal to voters, so they may well deliberately style themselves to appeal to certain parts of the electorate (though there

is evidence that we're able to make reasonably accurate guesses about political views when looking at members of the public too).

These snap judgements also seem to influence the way we vote, beyond the obvious fact that we're voting for either left- or right-wing candidates. Even the smallest differences in appearance can have an effect.

A study by researchers in the USA showed that looking more 'Republican' could win you more votes in Republican states.[15] Analysing the data from past elections, they discovered that a Republican candidate in one state who looks the part will win more votes, on average, than a Republican candidate in another state who looks less 'Republican'. It's also been shown that Democrats can get more votes in Republican states by looking more 'Republican'.

In contrast, however, politicians who looked more like Democrats didn't seem to do any better in more Democratic states. So this bias – if we can call it a bias – seems to hold more for Republican voters. This might make some sense in the context of some of the findings we discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

As we have seen, right-wing voters often value group loyalty and respect to authority, they are more likely to endorse traditional values and they tend overall to be more conscientious. It's clearly important for right-wing

politicians to signal their support for traditional values and respect for conventions in the way they look, and this can contribute to their success with certain voters, especially those who are more protective of the status quo.

This was memorably demonstrated in one of the most famous exchanges between then-Prime Minister David Cameron and Leader of the Opposition Jeremy Corbyn, in which Cameron offered Corbyn some gentle advice to 'put on a proper suit and do up your tie'. There could be no more direct illustration of someone on the right admonishing someone on the left for not living up to the expected customs and conventions of political office. Over his career Corbyn had made a point of defending his right to wear rustic jumpers in the House of Commons (at one time saying, 'It's not a private members' club.'). However, since taking up a position of more importance on the national stage, Corbyn seems to have followed Cameron's advice, and in the 2017 election campaign he almost always appeared in a smart shirt.

Although such concerns clearly don't come naturally to Corbyn, over time he seems to have decided to respect other people's expectations, and he was probably right to do so if he wanted to broaden his appeal among the voting public.

Of course not all politicians of the left will challenge the status quo quite so directly. Most politicians

will attempt to appeal across the political spectrum – and of course they will be trying to look as competent as possible.

Being caught in a compromising position is potentially disastrous and politicians are well aware of this. In the run-up to the 2015 election, for example, some parts of the right-wing British press were very effective in publicising a particularly embarrassing photo of the left-wing candidate for prime minister, Ed Miliband, eating a bacon sandwich. Of course this made for a handy pun ('save our bacon'), but campaign advisors for the Conservative Party were likely very conscious of the influence such an image might have. When she was running in the primaries to be nominated as the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton told Stephen Colbert that was exactly why she didn't eat in front of the press: 'They could get a funny shot. You know, something could drop out of your mouth. You could smear your face . . . anything that makes you look silly.'

Politicians are always ready to pounce on something that could undermine their opponents in this way. When footage emerged showing Hillary Clinton stumbling as she got into a car, Donald Trump ran attack ads accusing her of lacking the 'fortitude, strength or stamina' to lead the country. Meanwhile, Obama's White House spokesman Josh Earnest said that Trump's appearance

– and particularly his hair – made it easy to understand why people didn't regard him as a serious candidate: 'The Trump campaign has had a dustbin of history-like quality to it, from the vacuous sloganeering, to the outright lies to even the fake hair, the whole carnival barker routine,' he said.

Does Trump's hairstyle really say anything about his character or candidacy? Does Hillary Clinton's stumble really say anything about her stamina? Probably not. So, is the influence of someone's appearance on how we vote a 'bias'? Well, yes and no. As we've seen, a bias sometimes implies a deviation from what is objectively correct – our perceptions or beliefs don't match the facts.

If we really do vote for people who we think look more competent, that clearly is a bias, as there is no evidence that we can accurately guess whether someone will make for a more competent politician just from looking at their face.

However, if someone is 'biased' to vote for candidates who look conventional in their appearance (or, indeed, unconventional), who is to say whether that is a bias? If voters want candidates who meet their expectations of how they think politicians should appear, that isn't objectively incorrect.

And, of course, we are all different. From conversations I've had with voters over the years, it is clear that

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