

How people look running for office can be an important factor in their electoral success or failure.

Given the degree to which many people value physical attractiveness in society today, it may come as little surprise that voters' decisions are often based to some degree on how candidate's look. But to what extent is this the case? In new research, [Rodrigo Praino](#) finds that when a candidate runs against someone of the same gender, the most attractive candidate receives more votes, but when men and women run against one another, the candidate that looks the most competent is favored by voters.



Does the physical appearance of politicians matter when it comes to their electoral victory prospects? Evidence from the United States seems to point us towards a resounding 'yes.' In [recent research](#), with Daniel Stockemer and James Ratis, we show that individuals running for public office enjoy an electoral vote premium based on nothing more than their looks.

Modern society is often accused of being too "visual." In brief, we seem to place way too much importance on physical appearance. This kind of behaviour, especially in the [workplace](#), led some to talk about "lookism" and to discuss possible [legal remedies](#) to discrimination based on physical appearance. Meanwhile, voters in democratic countries also are often accused of being [uninformed](#) and [apathetic](#). Under these circumstances, it is only natural that many voters will make their decisions based on how people running for office look.

We showed pictures of both major-party candidates running for the [United States House of Representatives](#) in 2008 to 160 fourth-year undergraduate students at the University of Ottawa, in Canada, and asked them how attractive and how competent on a scale of 0 to 10 they thought each candidate was. We made it very clear that all we wanted was an objective assessment, regardless of whether or not they were sexually attracted to the person in the pictures. We decided to use Canadian students because their ideal of beauty is similar to that of Americans, but being Canadians they—or, at least, most of them—had no idea of who those people were, what party they belonged to or what they stood for as politicians. We then repeated the same experiment using random people from all over the world—with the exception of people in the United States, to avoid bias—using an online tool called [Mechanical Turk](#). Finally, we calculated two measures that we call "Attractiveness Differential" and "Competence Differential." Very simply, each of them is the score of the person who won the election minus the score of the person who lost the election.

We put together these "physical attractiveness" data with our U.S. electoral data and ran a few statistical models predicting the vote-share of candidates. Here, I present the results of these models transformed using [CLARIFY](#) by utilising as an example successful incumbents, keeping all other covariates included in the models at their mean values.

Figure 1 shows the predicted vote premium based on the "Attractiveness Differential." Clearly, the results we obtained using the data from the Canadian students is almost perfectly identical to the results we obtained using the Mechanical Turk data. Overall, we show that candidates get penalised for being less attractive than their opponents and rewarded for being more attractive than whomever they run against.

Figure 1 – Vote Premium of Perceived Attractiveness

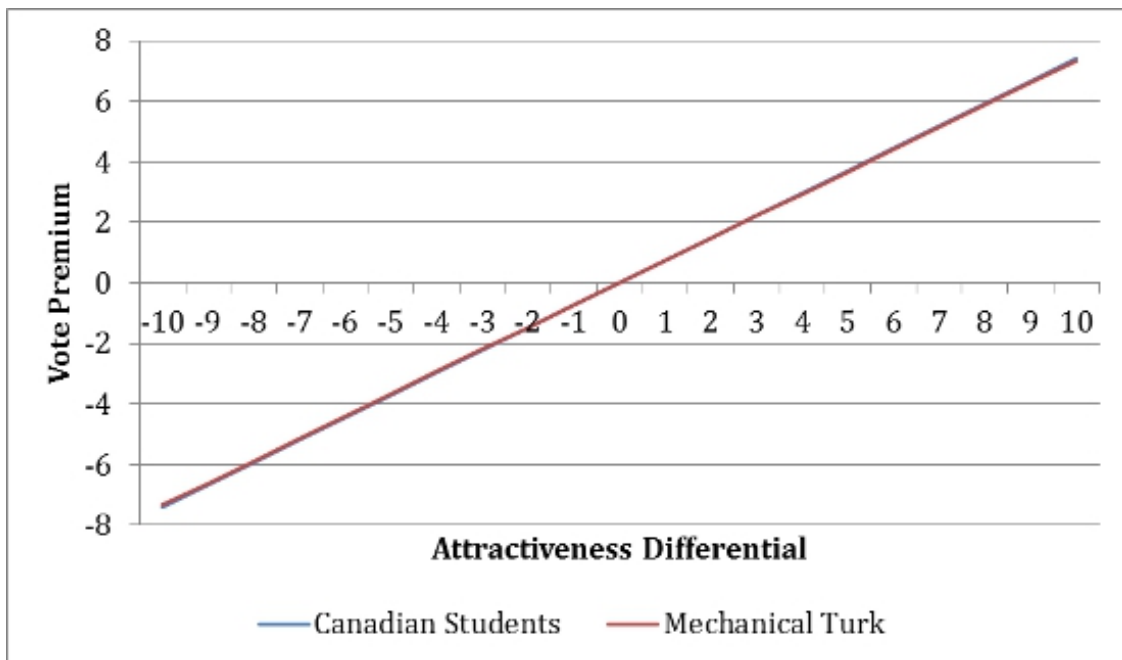
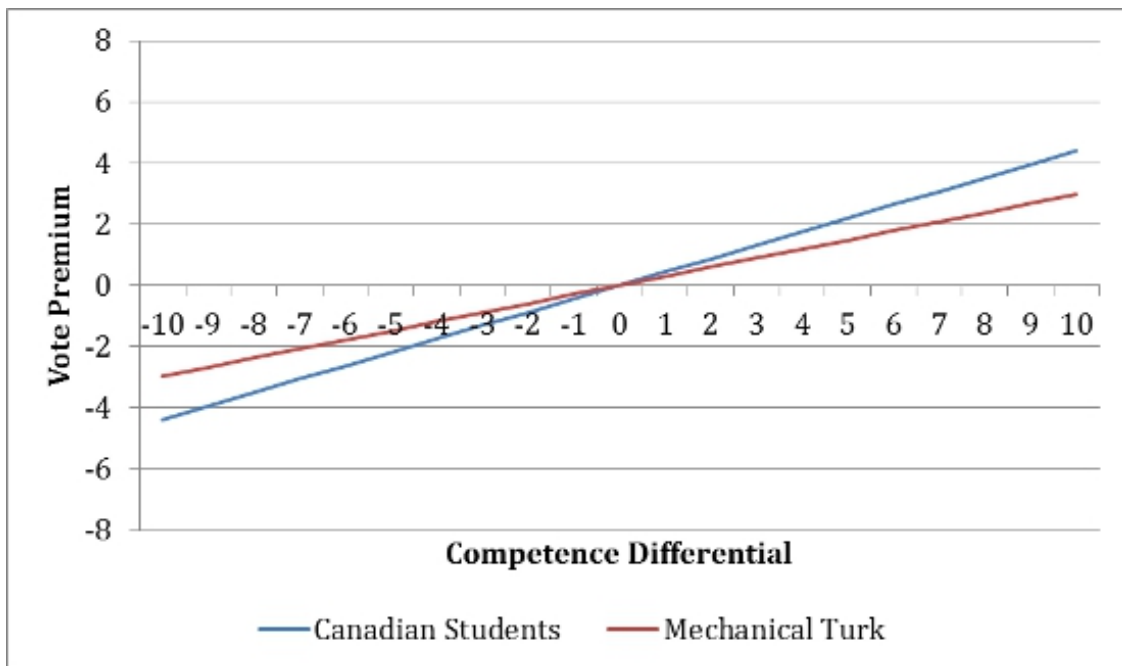


Figure 2 shows the predicted vote premium based on the “Competence Differential.” Once again, the results obtained utilising the two different sets of data are very similar. Here, as well, we show that people running for public office tend to be rewarded by voters for simply appearing to be more competent than their opponent and penalised at the ballot box if their competitor appears to be more competent.

Figure 2: Vote Premium of Perceived Competence



As interesting as these results are, there is more to it. In fact, these results do not hold across all possible gender combinations. The results—in terms of statistical significance and magnitude of some of the coefficients—actually change a great deal based on the gender of the candidates, which led us to come up with a slightly more complex and complete interpretation of our data based on gender differences.

When a man runs against another man, or a woman runs against another woman, we have what we call an *intra*-gender race. In this case, voters are asked to choose between two men or two women. Reasonably, when looking at two people of the same gender, most people, under most circumstances, are able to quickly recognise who is more attractive between the two. In other words, in the presence of intra-gender races, it is quite easy for voters to quickly and effortlessly determine who is the most attractive candidate by a quick look at them. Conversely, when a man and a woman run against each other, we have what we call an *inter*-gender race. In this case, voters are

asked to choose between candidates of opposite genders. It becomes tricky and complicated to quickly determine who is more attractive between two people of opposite genders.

We find that when men run against men or women run against women (*intra*-gender races), the most attractive candidate tends to receive more votes and, consequently, win the election. On the contrary, when men and women run against each other (*inter*-gender races), we find that the candidate who looks more competent tends to receive more votes and win the election. In the first scenario (*intra*-gender races), the competence dimension is completely and entirely irrelevant. In the second scenario (*inter*-gender races), the attractiveness dimension has no importance at all.

Overall, our research shows that physical appearance is very important in contemporary politics, and how people running for office look can determine their electoral success and demise. However, voters do not and will not judge candidates either based on their looks alone, or based on their looks in absolute terms. In fact, we are able to show that voters judge people running for office based on their looks *in relation to* the looks of the person running against them. Political parties, politicians, pundits and electioneering experts should take these findings into account while organising or analysing elections.

*This article is based on the paper, [Looking Good or Looking Competent? Physical Appearance and Electoral Success in the 2008 Congressional Elections](#), in *American Politics Research*.*

Featured image credit: [Rusty Blazenhoff](#) (Flickr, [CC-BY-NC-2.0](#))

Please read our [comments policy](#) before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/1w0bX8n>

About the author

Rodrigo Praino – *Flinders University*

Rodrigo Praino is a Researcher in the School of Social and Policy Studies at Flinders University. His research interests include American Politics, Comparative Politics, Inequality, and Ethnic Politics.

- CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 2014 LSE USAPP

