

# Physical appearance and elections: An inequality perspective

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## Abstract

A consensus seems to exist around physically attractive candidates winning elections more often. Unfortunately, we have limited understanding of how voters assess candidates with socioeconomically (dis)advantageous physical appearances. To bridge this gap, we studied the electoral consequences of candidates looking upper class, middle class, or working class. Using official electoral data for the 2017 Finnish municipal elections and a novel data set based on a representative sample of the Finnish population ( $N=7,920$ ), we found that Finnish citizens systematically vote for candidates who look like they have (and do have) upper-class occupations. Furthermore, the data strongly suggest that a systematic electoral penalty exists, particularly for female candidates who look like they have (and do have) working-class occupations.

## INTRODUCTION

Past research has convincingly shown a positive association between a political candidate's physical attractiveness and electoral success (Dion et al., 1972; Efrain & Patterson, 1974; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Stockemer & Praino, 2019). Examples range from high-information electoral events, such as the well-studied Kennedy–Nixon 1960 presidential debate (Mattes et al., 2010), to low-information (e.g., municipal) elections (Berggren et al., 2017).

In this article, we suggest that previous research has concentrated almost exclusively on the effect of physical attractiveness on voting.<sup>1</sup> That is, notwithstanding the positive effects of physical attractiveness on the number of votes a candidate receives in an election, the effect of social class

<sup>1</sup>In this article, we use the term *attractiveness*. However, the stratification literature often uses it interchangeably with *beauty*.

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inequalities on voting, manifested in the candidate's physical appearance—that is, looking upper or lower class—remains relatively understudied. This is a rather important yet overlooked question. Substantively, we note that attractiveness is just *one* dimension of physical appearance. For example, going beyond physical attractiveness, we do not know whether candidates who embody working-class looks perform better or worse in elections where they run against middle- or upper-class-looking candidates and whether this potential relationship varies by gender. Overall, we contend that having overlooked the intertwined role of physical appearance and social stratification in voting leaves an important gap in the literature. Since individual perceptions of candidates inform voting decisions (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001) with vast political consequences (e.g., the formation and dissolution of governments), we believe that addressing this serious question is essential.

Building on the theory of status characteristics and expectation states (Monk et al., 2021; Ridgeway, 2011; Webster & Driskell, 1983), we suggest that the returns of physical appearance vary considerably by subgroup—that is, by combinations of status characteristics (see also Jæger, 2011; Kuwabara & Thébaud, 2017; Monk et al., 2021; Webster & Driskell, 1983). In this article, we analyze the interplay of two candidate-status characteristics: occupation-based social class and gender. Thus, the article provides new insights into social inequalities in voting, with a focus on physical appearance.

Drawing also from the literature on the use of heuristics in elections (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973), we argue that information about a candidate's occupation and physical appearance works via status cues (Stockemer & Praino, 2017). These “cheap” heuristic shortcuts affect voting choices, particularly in low-information elections. Importantly, because looks will more likely penalize women (Kukkonen et al., 2023), we also take a gender perspective and study these dynamics separately for female and male candidates. Our empirical expectation is that higher-status male candidates (i.e., candidates with high-status occupations) should perform better in low-information elections than women candidates, especially if the candidate looks like she has a low-status occupation. We call this phenomenon the “double cue of occupational status.”

Leveraging these two bodies of literature, we use the case of the 2017 Finnish municipal elections. Empirically, we explore the degree to which a political candidate's appearance—in particular, looking like one has an upper-class, a middle-class, or a working-class occupation—affects the number of votes the candidate receives. We designed our case study using a high-quality data set comprising a subsample of photographs of municipal candidates ( $N=1,412$ ) and a representative sample of Finns ( $N=7,920$ ) who rated those pictures according to several dimensions. Critically, we capitalize on the use of posters in Finnish municipal elections as the primary strategy for political campaigning. These posters prominently feature the candidate's name, headshot, and occupation. Our findings suggest two main points. First, Finnish citizens systematically vote for candidates who look like they have (and do have) upper-class occupations. Second, candidates who look like they have working-class occupations, especially females, suffer a systematic electoral penalty. That is, Finns systematically punish working-class candidates in the voting booth, and even more so if the candidate is a woman.

Our main contribution is the introduction of the expectation states theory (Correll & Ridgeway, 2006; Webster & Driskell, 1983) in an effort to bridge the current gap in voting behavior studies, specifically addressing the relationship between physical appearance and inequality (Belmi & Neale, 2014; Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994; Kalick, 1988). We also make other accompanying contributions. First, we contribute to the candidate evaluation literature by presenting an alternative framework that voters use, namely, evaluations based on cues that go beyond physical attractiveness (Berggren et al., 2010). Second, we study social discrimination against women in politics (Ditonto & Mattes, 2018; Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2020). Third, from a measurement perspective, we introduce a new method for measuring congruence between physical appearance and occupation (Sarpila, Koivula, & Kukkonen, 2021), a concept the literature on physical appearance and candidate evaluation has largely ignored.

This article is organized as follows. First, we introduce the expectation states theory, which is a theoretical framework developed to elucidate the connection between social categories and inequality. Second, we discuss the literature on heuristics and candidate evaluation to frame physical appearance as one of the main heuristic devices available to voters for evaluating candidates. Importantly, this section links physical appearance to a heuristic that embodies social inequalities in voting. We then present our case, data, measurement strategy, statistical models, and empirical findings. Finally, we discuss our contribution, outlining its main limitations.

## PHYSICAL APPEARANCE AS A LOCUS OF INEQUALITY

Most studies on physical attractiveness and socioeconomic outcomes have convincingly shown that social inequalities with a basis in physical appearance are embedded in various fields of life, including marital life (Jæger, 2011; McClintock, 2014) and labor markets (for a review, see Hamermesh, 2011; Maestriperi et al., 2017). Ultimately, physical appearance—not just in terms of facial and/or body attractiveness—“cue[s] social categories and signifi[ies] social status,” making it a “potentially critical locus of inequality” (Monk et al., 2021, p. 196).

The theoretical framework we introduce is known as “expectation states theory,” which specifically examines how gender, occupation, race, and attractiveness contribute to social inequalities. The mechanism that generates inequality operates within social interactions. It involves the activation of norms that determine which social groups are deemed more worthy of status and perceived as more capable. This dynamic leads to social discrimination and contributes to the persistence of inequality (Correll & Ridgeway, 2006; Ridgeway, 2011, 2014; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Social norms are shared stereotypes whose significance people actualize in social situations as they combine social categories with (e)valuative judgments (Ridgeway, 2011, 2014; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). In fact, research shows that physical appearance serves as the main information source for these types of evaluations, particularly in situations where individuals have limited information about the other person (for a review, see Hosoda et al., 2003). Accordingly, physical attractiveness is similar to other status characteristics, such as gender, race, and occupation, which form the basis for treating people unequally. This holds significant importance, as attractive individuals are often perceived as “better” and “more capable” compared to those considered less attractive (Frevert & Walker, 2014; Kuwabara & Thébaud, 2017; Wolbring & Riordan, 2016; see also Webster & Driskell, 1983, for a review).

In addition, the title of an occupation per se as well as external cues of occupational status also function as status characteristics. In the long tradition of classifying occupations according to prestige (Treiman, 1977), socioeconomic status (Ganzeboom et al., 1992), and social class (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992), occupational sorting has been called the “backbone” of stratification research (Ganzeboom & Treiman, 1996, p. 202; Rose & Harrison, 2007). Overall, as Rose and Harrison (2007, p. 460) note, “the life chances of individuals and families are largely determined by their position in the market[,] and occupation is taken to be its central indicator.”

A complementary approach that links physical appearance and inequality is the Bourdieusian approach. For instance, the occupational title could be used as an indicator of social class, a concept that Bourdieu explored in his research. However, Bourdieu adopted a broader perspective on social classes, considering factors beyond just occupational titles. According to this framework, social classes are based on different types of capital: economic capital (e.g., wealth and income), cultural capital (e.g., educational qualifications, attitudes toward art, culture, clothing, and physical appearance), and social capital (e.g., social relations), the composition and volume of which vary from one social class to another (Bourdieu, 1984, 1986). Thus, for example, the upper class might comprise individuals with relatively higher levels of cultural capital but not excessive incomes (e.g., professors), as well as people with higher incomes but not necessarily much formal education (e.g., successful

entrepreneurs; Flemmen et al., 2017). Even more importantly, Bourdieu emphasized the embodied nature of social class: clothing and physical appearance can provide social markers that sort different social classes according to how individuals dress and look (Bourdieu, 1984).

All in all, the Bourdieusian approach consistently makes the case that social class is embodied. Thus, people not only express their own social class through their appearance but also make inferences about other people's class status based on the way they look (Kuipers, 2015). Thus, styles of grooming (i.e., makeup, hair, and beard styles), clothing (Kraus et al., 2013; Nelissen & Meijers, 2011; Skeggs, 2001), and body size and shape (Keas & Beer, 1992; cf. Vandebroeck, 2016) become cues of social class. Importantly, such cues make a difference, for instance, in “filtering in” certain job candidates in some labor markets (De Keere, 2022; Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Mears, 2011). Furthermore, recent research has shown that young children can already classify other people into occupational status categories using attributes of physical appearance as cues (Vandebroeck, 2021). We believe a similar process of occupational status recognition and “filtering in” likely takes place in low-information elections.

However, examining status characteristics with a basis in physical appearance cannot occur without taking gender into account (Kuwabara & Thébaud, 2017; Monk et al., 2021; Sarpila et al., 2020; Sarpila, Kukkonen, et al., 2021). Gender is the primary frame that people use to classify each other (Ridgeway, 2011). For example, Goffman (1951) suggested that attractiveness is a gender-specific status characteristic. More recent empirical research has also shown that physical attractiveness intersects with gender, producing both favorable and unfavorable outcomes for women (Frevert & Walker, 2014; Heilman & Eagly, 2008; Kuwabara & Thébaud, 2017). Moreover, a recent review of the socioeconomic outcomes of physical attractiveness indicates that although men and women are equally likely to be rewarded for their physical attractiveness, women are more likely to be penalized because of how they look (Kukkonen et al., 2023). Furthermore, studies on double standards have suggested that women are expected to attend to their physical appearance but are more likely to be disapproved of if they try to gain an economic advantage through their physical appearance-related assets, as opposed to men engaging in the same behavior (Kukkonen et al., 2018; Sarpila et al., 2020). To summarize, we expect physical appearance as a status characteristic to interact with gender in political contexts as well.

## LINKING PHYSICAL APPEARANCE AND VOTING: THE USE OF HEURISTICS IN ELECTIONS

The effect of physical appearance on voting has been extensively studied, but only in the context of the candidate's attractiveness. As Schubert et al. (2011, p. 34) put it, “being physically attractive matters for electoral success.” Dion et al. (1972) coined the axiom “beautiful is good,” and later extensions introduced the so-called frog pond effect: “if an attractive candidate competes with some ugly rivals he or she will receive a higher poll” (Rosar et al., 2008, p. 73). Therefore, the relationship between looks and electoral success is not only old (Ditonto & Mattes, 2018, p. 430) but also strong. For instance, Berggren et al. (2017, p. 79) note that it is “*well established* that politicians with an appealing appearance win more votes in elections,”<sup>2</sup> while others argue that “*dozens* of studies have confirmed that the more attractive a candidate is, the more votes he or she tends to receive” (Praino & Stockemer, 2019, p. 531).<sup>3</sup> In sum, “it is *widely* believed that a candidate's personal image affects his or her chances of being elected” (Sigelman et al., 1987, p. 32).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup>Emphasis added.

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Voters use physical appearance as a heuristic to make inferences about political candidates. Such usage makes heuristics “problem-solving strategies” (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001, p. 952) for reducing the complex tasks of assessing political information, mainly due to the limits of human cognitive capacity (Miller et al., 1986, p. 523; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974, p. 3). In fact, a candidate's physical appearance is “the most important” (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001, p. 954) and the “most obvious and accessible” (Dion et al., 1972, p. 285) heuristic available to voters and, overall, their “major source of information” (Todorov et al., 2005, p. 1623) when evaluating candidates (Lawson et al., 2010, p. 563). Thus, voters use this heuristic as a cognitive shortcut to compensate for a lack of information (Rosar et al., 2008, p. 64; importantly, see Hart et al., 2011). For example, voters look at photographs of the candidates (Banducci et al., 2008, p. 903) or “watch a good deal of TV” (Lenz & Lawson, 2011, p. 575) because the way candidates look provides cues in low-information elections. In summary, and as Riggle et al. (1992, p. 67) noted, “[i]n the absence of other information, candidates' physical attractiveness [has] a substantial influence on subjects' [...] evaluations of them [as they make] inferences of both their personal qualities and their political ideology.”

Heuristics have proved to help voters not only when they lack political information but also when a large amount of information is available. In these contexts as well, physical appearance is used as an effective heuristic. Herrmann and Shikano (2016, p. 414) find that once a voter has evaluated a candidate's facial image, new and potentially more relevant information is discarded. Similarly, Keating et al. (1999, pp. 594–595) explain that facial cues loom larger in decision making once more important but harder-to-get information becomes available. All in all, voters use heuristics because it allows them to “vote correctly,” especially voters who already have access to some political information (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001).

In general, “voters vote beautiful” (Efrain & Patterson, 1974) because attractiveness serves as a heuristic for something else. For instance, Banducci et al. (2008, p. 903) report that attractive candidates “are more likely to be attributed the qualities associated with successful politicians,” suffer less when involved in scandals (Stockemer & Praino, 2019, p. 747), and appear more competent and trustworthy (Berggren et al., 2010, p. 8). Thus, attractiveness is associated with attributes (Mattes et al., 2010) and personality traits (Banducci et al., 2008) desirable in politicians, such as honesty, productivity, or conservatism (Berggren et al., 2017).

Unfortunately, most studies fail to see this association as it relates to inequality and social stratification. With very few exceptions, studies of physical attractiveness occur in the context of the perceived socioeconomic status of candidates (Belmi & Neale, 2014; Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994; Kalick, 1988). For instance, Price et al. (2011, p. 636) point out that physically attractive individuals tend to be “less egalitarian.”<sup>5</sup> Consequently, although this area of research has shown much progress, we find it limiting that most studies exclusively reference physical attractiveness, neglecting other aspects of physical appearance that might also explain voting choices.

## EMPIRICAL ANALYSES: PHYSICAL APPEARANCE AND VOTING IN FINLAND

### The Finnish case

In Finland, municipalities provide basic public services, such as daycare, education, and water and waste management, *inter alia*. Every four years, municipal elections occur to elect

<sup>5</sup>The causal link between inequality and physical attractiveness is that because “good-looking people [...] achieve higher occupational success” (Berggren et al., 2010, p. 8; see also Scholz & Sicinski, 2015), they tend to be less egalitarian (Price et al., 2011).



councilors. There are 293 municipalities in mainland Finland (Borg, 2018).<sup>6</sup> The local council determines the number of councilors, but a minimum is set in each municipality based on its population.

Finnish municipal elections use the D'Hondt electoral system, in which citizens vote for candidates running on party lists. The votes candidates receive determine their rank. Seats are then filled in proportion to the total votes received by each party list. Consequently, parties have strong incentives to present large lists of candidates, even if that means bringing in “list fillers.” Importantly, recruiting such a large number of candidates to fill in the lists is a difficult task for parties, which must actively convince local residents to stand as candidates (Kestilä-Kekkonen et al., 2018). Thus, recruited individuals are not necessarily career-oriented politicians. As a result, ordinary people do run for municipal elections.<sup>7</sup> This electoral feature is critical for our identification strategy, as it ensures that “normal” individuals do campaign, as opposed to, for instance, only the wealthy or the good-looking. Notably, this feature shows in campaign posters, where casual knitwear and even hoodies are as common as suits and other more formal clothes, a fact that goes hand in hand with the Finnish emphasis on functionality and frugality (Sarpila, Kukkonen, et al., 2021).<sup>8</sup>

We believe Finland is a suitable case to study the effect of physical appearance on voting choices for many reasons. First, Finnish municipal elections are low-information elections—that is, they do not attract broad media coverage (Berggren et al., 2017, p. 80). Second, as Berggren et al. (2017, p. 83) explain, political “advertising is mainly restricted to posters and newspaper ads; hardly any candidates run individual campaigns on television or radio.” Thus, most voters are only exposed to official candidate pictures. Alternative opportunities to see how the candidates look, sound, and dress—for instance, in television debates or radio ads—would potentially confound our identification strategy in multiple ways, most importantly because of differences in the levels of campaign spending. Third, Finland has been consistently considered a democratic (Marshall & Jaggers, 2020), economically egalitarian (Waltl, 2022), gender egalitarian (e.g., Lohmann & Zagel, 2016), and social mobility-prone (Erola, 2009) country. Therefore, Finland should be a “hard case” in which to find any correlation between class-congruent physical appearance and voting. Thus, we believe that exploiting a “least-likely case design” (Levy, 2008) should offer more inferential leverage in the study of elections, physical appearance, and inequality.

## DATA AND MEASUREMENT STRATEGY

We exploited several data sources. First, in the context of Finnish municipal elections, political campaigns use headshots of the candidates running for office, along with the candidate's name, party affiliation, and occupation. This information is public and appears in city centers, bus stops, public squares, and other highly frequented places, including voting booths (Berggren et al., 2010, p. 12). Importantly, newspaper ads also display the *same* photos (Berggren et al., 2010, p. 10), and “each municipality is obliged by law to provide each party with the same number of slots for posters” (Berggren et al., 2017, p. 83). Second, the Department for Democracy and Public Law (<http://www.vaalit.fi>) collects this visual information, along with each candidate's vote count, electoral district, age, and occupation (declared by the candidates).

<sup>6</sup>There are 16 municipalities in the autonomous Province of Åland. The Åland region does not hold elections at the same time as mainland Finland and was consequently excluded from the analyses.

<sup>7</sup>However, the nomination process might differ significantly between larger and smaller municipalities (Kestilä-Kekkonen et al., 2018). For example, for the 2017 Finnish municipal elections, Helsinki had 7,500 inhabitants per counselor, whereas in smaller municipalities the ratio was around 50 inhabitants per counselor (Borg & Pikkala, 2017).

<sup>8</sup>We thank one of the reviewers for encouraging this discussion.

Thus, for the 2017 Finnish municipal elections, a subsample of candidates was collected. Out of a universe of 33,618 candidates, we collected more than 10,000 photographs.<sup>9</sup> From among the available pictures, we randomly selected 1,500 images, a subsample to maximize statistical representativeness at the national level regarding gender and occupation and, particularly, the share of women in any given occupation. To satisfy the latter criteria, we analyzed data from the Official Statistics of Finland Office (2017) in parallel. The final data set consisted of 1,415 photographs. Then, taking the candidates' occupational data as a starting point, we followed the European Socioeconomic Classification (Harrison & Rose, 2006) and coded each candidate's occupation by class (i.e., upper, middle, or working class).

In addition, we constructed a novel data set of physical appearance ratings using a representative sample of Finnish citizens. First, we drew a random sample of 26,500 Finnish-speaking Finns, aged 18–64, from the Finnish population census. During the fall of 2020, these potential respondents were sent one postal invitation and one postal reminder to participate in an online survey. Respondents received a different survey URL in the invitations. In total, 7,920 raters participated in the survey.

Ideally, we would have directly asked the 7,920 raters to evaluate whether candidates looked as if they came from the working, middle, or upper class. However, that would have introduced social desirability biases into our responses. This widely studied effect appears in other contexts where subjects avoid answering truthfully due to social pressure, especially when the questions ask about drug use (Druckman et al., 2015), sexual preferences (LaBrie & Earleywine, 2000), attitudes toward race (Kuklinski et al., 1997; Redlawsk et al., 2010), or vote buying (Bahamonde, 2022; Blair & Imai, 2012; González-Ocantos et al., 2012). We believe that directly asking raters to make inferences about the candidates' social classes based on physical appearance would constitute an inappropriate question in the Finnish context. Furthermore, the term *social class* is rarely used among the general population because of the “equal Finland” narrative. Thus, to elicit truthful answers, our empirical strategy instead considered asking this question indirectly, that is, asking raters to evaluate the extent to which a member of a category (in this case, a person representing a certain occupation) fits a more generally shared idea or image of the meaning of the category name (cf. Rosch & Mervis, 1975), only then matching those occupations within the three social classes.

To avoid fatigue effects, we asked raters to assess a random subsample of candidates according to several attributes (see Table 1). Sample 1 evaluated the congruence between the candidate's physical appearance and occupation, Sample 2 evaluated the candidate's attractiveness, Sample 3 evaluated the candidate's masculinity,<sup>10</sup> and Sample 4 evaluated the candidate's femininity.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the attribute on which raters evaluated their random sample of photographs differed among the four samples. In practice, each of the 7,920 raters evaluated 50 candidate photographs assigned at random.

Importantly, data from the raters show high levels of intraclass correlation: .24 for male and .22 for female candidates for occupation-congruent appearance, .14 for male and .22 for female candidates for femininity, .15 for male and .10 for female candidates for masculinity, and .28 for male and .35 for female candidates for attractiveness (Sarpila et al., 2021). All in all,

<sup>9</sup>Although in principle all photographs ought to be properly archived and publicly available (Act on Cultural Resources in Finland [1433] 2007), gathering the photographs proved laborious. They were processed in GIMP to remove any identifying information. Additionally, to test the usability of the images, we conducted a pilot study, removing images of insufficient quality from the sample. However, Lenz and Lawson (2011) explain that the physical appearance effect holds even when “differences in image quality and other aspects of the pictures, such as visible light, are taken into account” (p. 575).

<sup>10</sup>Masculinity was defined for respondents using the definition of the official *Dictionary of Contemporary Finnish* (*Kielitoimiston sanakirja*), a dictionary of standard Finnish compiled by the Institute for the Languages of Finland: “masculinity refers to manly, mannish.” The respondents were also reminded that both men and women can be perceived as masculine.

<sup>11</sup>Femininity was defined as “womanly, effeminate,” according to the official *Dictionary of Contemporary Finnish*. The respondents were also reminded that both men and women can be perceived as feminine/masculine.

TABLE 1 Attributes assigned to raters by sampling criteria and answer set.

Sample	Attribute	Question	Answer set
1	Occupation-Congruent Appearance	<i>To what extent does this person correspond to your image of someone working in [occupation]?</i>	5 = perfectly corresponds to my image; 4 = corresponds well to my image; 3 = somewhat corresponds to my image; 2 = does not correspond well to my image; 1 = does not correspond to my image at all.
2	Attractiveness	<i>In your opinion, how attractive does this person look compared to others of the same age and gender?</i>	5 = very attractive; 4 = more attractive than average; 3 = average; 2 = below average; 1 = well below average (e.g., Bono et al., 2017; Griffin & Langlois, 2006; Tu et al., 2022).
3	Masculinity	<i>To what extent do you think that this person looks masculine compared to others of the same age and gender?</i>	From 1 = not masculine at all to 5 = very masculine (e.g., Hoss et al., 2005).
4	Femininity	<i>To what extent do you think that this person looks feminine compared to others of the same age and gender?</i>	From 1 = not feminine at all to 5 = very feminine.



correlations are consistent with those in widely used data, such as the Add Health data, where the attractiveness correlations range from .17 to .20 (McClintock, 2014).

This strategy might raise a concern about self-selection bias if, for instance, high-status occupation candidates are usually perceived as more attractive or “politicians on the right look more beautiful” (Berggren et al., 2010, 2017; see also Belmi & Neale, 2014; Olivola et al., 2018; Price et al., 2011).<sup>12</sup> Figure 1 presents several distributions after averaging all raters' scores of the 1,415 candidates (see also Berggren et al., 2010, p. 11; Rosar et al., 2008, p. 71). The figure shows these densities broken down by relevant criteria. Since none of the subcategories differ statistically between these groups, the figure strongly suggests that self-selection biases are not a concern in our study.

For internal consistency, we would also like to see Finnish voters perceiving working-class candidates as working-class individuals, middle-class candidates as middle-class individuals, and so on. Similarly, we would like to see that Finnish candidates who look as though they have working-class occupations actually are working-class individuals, candidates who look as though they have middle-class occupations actually are middle-class individuals, and so on.<sup>13</sup> Other results would mean that either Finnish voters have a hard time assessing the occupation (class) of the candidate based on the candidate's appearance or candidates systematically look different from what they are. Either way, one or both assumptions failing to hold would seriously compromise our empirical claims.

To verify these assumptions, we show in Figure 2 that Finnish candidates scored an average of 3.3 (see Table 1; a score of 5 is the maximum congruence between physical appearance and occupation). This implies that Finnish voters find that 66% of the time, candidates do look like they belong to the class to which they actually belong. The figure also shows that candidates who look like they have working-class occupations are actually working-class individuals, and so on. Importantly, these levels are consistent for both male and female candidates.

Moving forward, to randomly assign pictures to raters, a survey rating tool was specially developed to ensure anonymization. The software presented respondents with random photographs from the pool of images, favoring images that had been rated fewer times. The software contrasted the candidate's electoral district with the respondent's electoral district and ruled out pictures of candidates from the respondent's electoral district. In addition, to further minimize recognition bias, images for which over half the respondents chose the option “I recognize the person in the photograph” were excluded from the analysis ( $N=4$ ).<sup>14</sup> Moreover, to minimize spillover effects (i.e., to isolate evaluations between the different photographs), a neutral screen with a simple black university logo on a white background appeared. Our design set no time limit for evaluating each picture.<sup>15</sup>

All in all, we believe that this novel data set relying on raters representative at the country level has clear advantages over other designs that rely on convenience samples, which may be the norm in physical appearance research (e.g., Mattes et al., 2010; Rosar et al., 2008; Wigginton & Stockemer, 2021). Furthermore, although the relationship between physical attractiveness and voting has already been studied in Finland (e.g., Berggren et al., 2010, 2017), we are not aware of any other study that exploited a representative sample of raters in the context of real (not mock) elections.

<sup>12</sup>We thank one of the reviewers for encouraging this discussion.

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<sup>14</sup>These included political “superstars” whom respondents seemed to recognize because of their membership in the Finnish Parliament.

<sup>15</sup>The literature on candidate evaluation consistently affirms that “photographs allow voters to form first impressions” about candidates (Banducci et al., 2008, p. 904). Importantly, voters do not update their initial inferences, even when new information is available (Antonakis & Dalgas, 2009, p. 1183). This “perceptual bias” has been identified in studies with 1-second exposure to facial appearance (Todorov et al., 2005, p. 1623). In fact, Mattes et al. (2010, p. 43) find that “judgments made at 100 milliseconds correlated highly with judgments with no time constraints.” Antonakis and Dalgas (2009) report that children have the same (and sometimes even *better*) predicting skills when choosing winning political candidates. Therefore, perceptual biases are invariant to the duration of exposure and are not corrected by increasing levels of political knowledge or age.

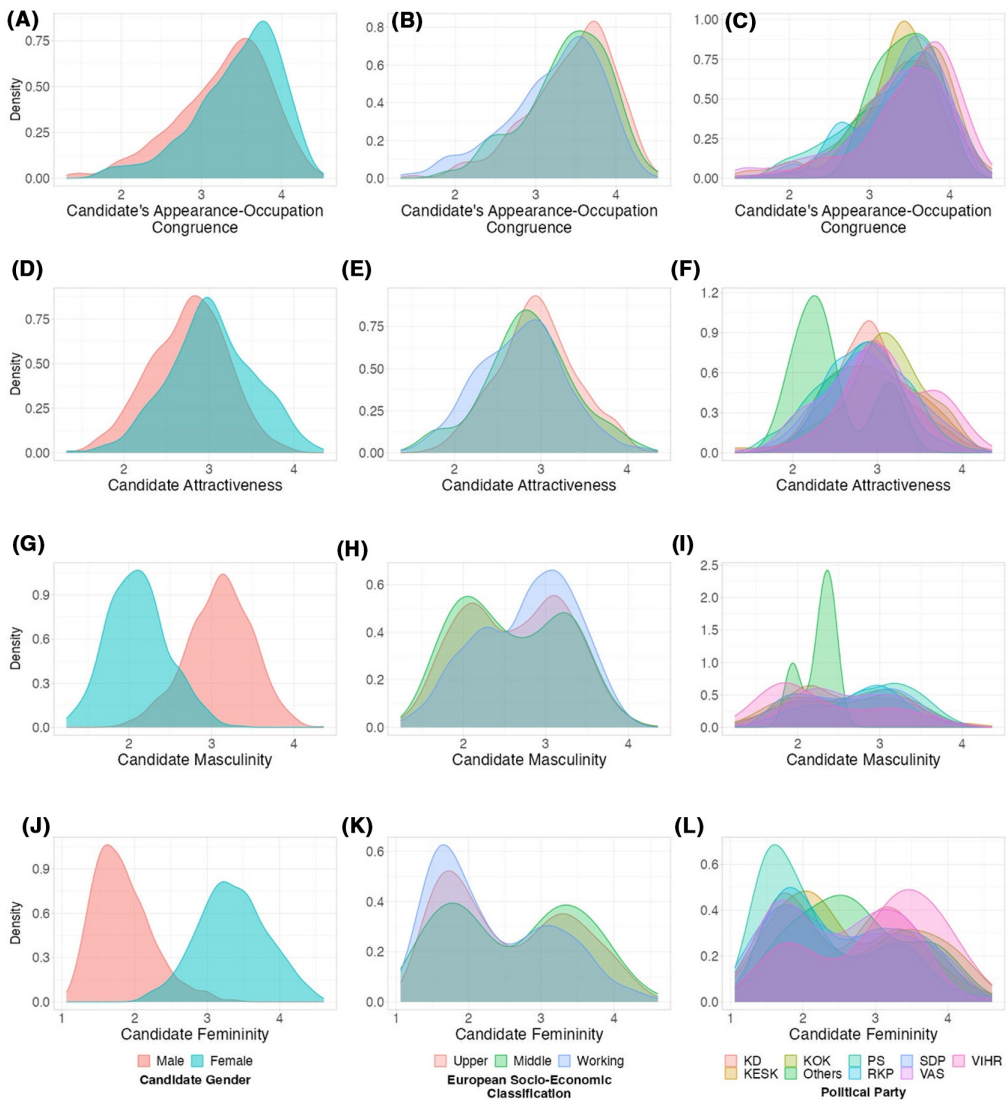
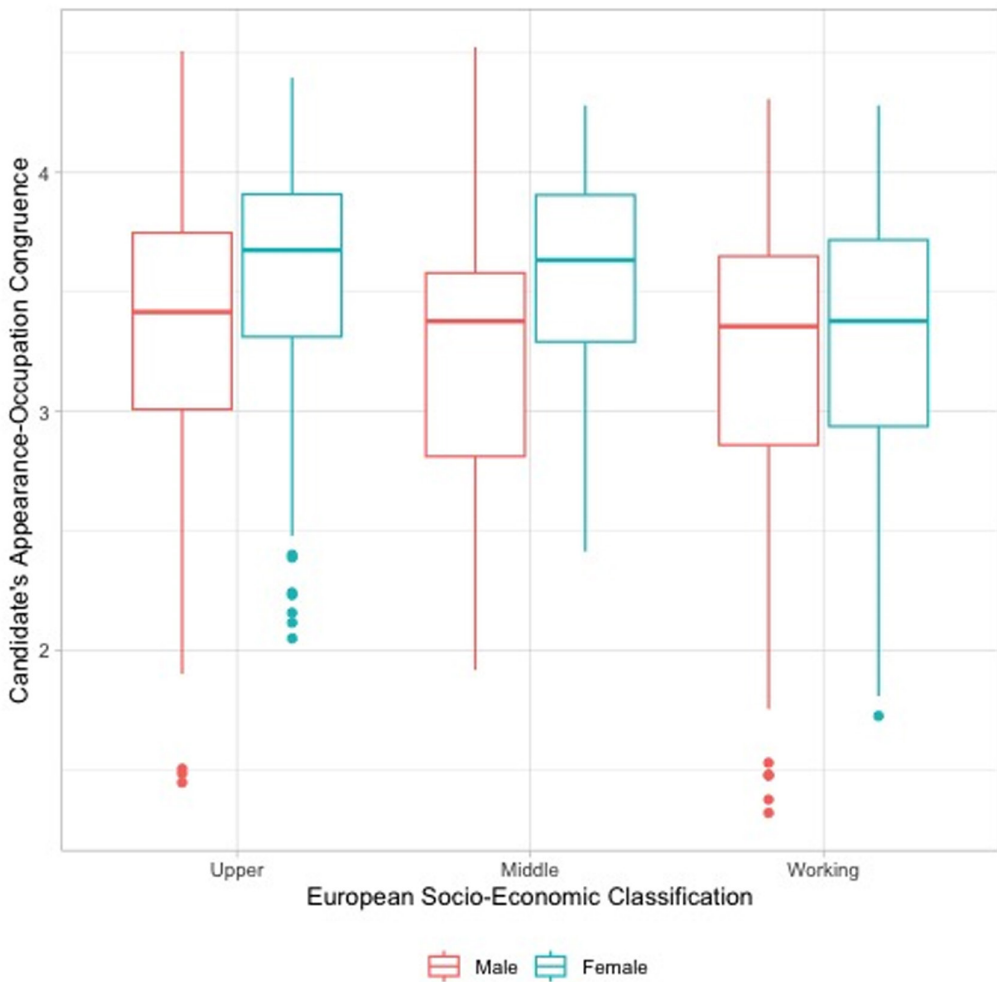


FIGURE 1 Distribution of physical appearance indexes broken down by relevant criteria.

## Statistical analyses

This section seeks to explain the number of votes each candidate received. From a substantive point of view, this variable has already been studied in the same form, also in the context of physical appearance (Efrain & Patterson, 1974). Following the statistical literature, we identify the data-generating process of the dependent variable as a Poisson process (Long, 1997).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup>In Poisson processes, the mean of the outcome variable equals the variance of the outcome variable (Long, 1997, p. 218). In our case, the votes variable shows some evidence of overdispersion. To relax the equidispersion assumption, both negative binomial and quasi-Poisson specifications were estimated (Fox & Weisberg, 2011). The substantive results remain intact. These analyses are available upon request.



**FIGURE 2** Candidate appearance–occupation congruence by candidate social class.

The main predictor is the estimated combined effects of physical appearance and social class of the candidate (i.e., looking like they belong and actually belonging to a certain class). Following Brambor et al. (2006), the equation included both the multiplicative and constitutive terms. We also analyzed the marginal effects plot (in Figure 2; see Lüdtke, 2021) and not the regression table (Brambor et al., 2006, p. 71). This is particularly important when estimating generalized linear models because the interaction effect could be nonzero (even when the estimation indicates that it is zero). Moreover, the statistical significance of the interaction effect cannot be tested with a simple *t*-test on the coefficient of the interaction term (Ai & Norton, 2003).

The model included several control variables. Since party affiliation is one of the main explanatory factors of voting (Bartels, 1996, 2000; Lau & Redlawsk, 2006), we considered an indicator variable for party.<sup>17</sup> In addition, because certain occupations might be age-specific, we included age as another control variable. This is relevant because physiognomic cues such as age set in motion social and political expectations, effectively signaling “dominance and strength” (Keating

<sup>17</sup>Party frequency is as follows: KD (Christian Democrats, *n* = 271), KESK (Centre Party, *n* = 54), KOK (National Coalition Party, *n* = 113), PS (Finns Party, *n* = 508), RKP (Swedish People's Party, *n* = 141), SDP (Social Democratic Party, *n* = 141), VAS (Left Alliance, *n* = 103), VIHR (Green League, *n* = 54), and others (PIR-Communist Party of Finland and SKP-Pirate Party, *n* = 4).

et al., 1999, p. 594). Finally, to account for unobserved but fixed omitted variables, we included city fixed effects in all models. By pursuing this econometric strategy, the model aims at controlling for city-specific factors, such as population size, different political cleavages (e.g., urban/rural, language), local party competition issues, and possible incumbency/contestation dynamics, among other hard-to-measure confounding factors (Angrist & Pischke, 2009). More formally, we fit the following Poisson model,

$$\log(\text{Votes}_i) = \beta_1 \text{Occupation} - \text{Appearance Congruence}_i \times \text{Social Class}_i + \beta_2 \text{Age}_i + \gamma_1 \text{Party}_i + \gamma_2 \text{City}_i + \Theta_i, \quad (1)$$

where the number of Votes of every candidate  $i$  is estimated as a function of the interaction between the levels of Occupation–Appearance Congruence and Social Class for every candidate  $i$  (captured by coefficient  $\beta_1$ ), the age of candidate  $i$  (captured by coefficient  $\beta_2$ ), plus the Party of candidate  $i$  and the City where candidate  $i$  ran (captured by fixed effects  $\gamma_1$  and  $\gamma_2$ , respectively). In addition, we considered extended control variables (i.e., attractiveness, masculinity and femininity levels) in the vector of observables  $\Theta$ . We also estimated several other combinations as robustness checks.

Importantly, the analyses take advantage of the sampling procedure and the statistical representativeness of the data at the gender level. Given that “the gender of candidates might interact with perceptions of physical appearance” (Praino et al., 2014, p. 1096) and that “attractiveness matters most for women candidates” (Banducci et al., 2008, p. 906; but see Ditonto & Mattes, 2018, p. 430), we partitioned the data by gender.<sup>18</sup> Overall, Finland is an excellent case because “Finnish elections are unusually suited for gender analysis, since there is a sizable number of both male and female candidates in all districts” (Berggren et al., 2010, p. 9). To take advantage of these features, Equation 1 was fitted using the complete, male and female data sets separately. We consider that an empirical advantage because most experimental studies on physical appearance and voting research “do not systematically consider the gender of the candidates involved” (Ditonto & Mattes, 2018, p. 431).

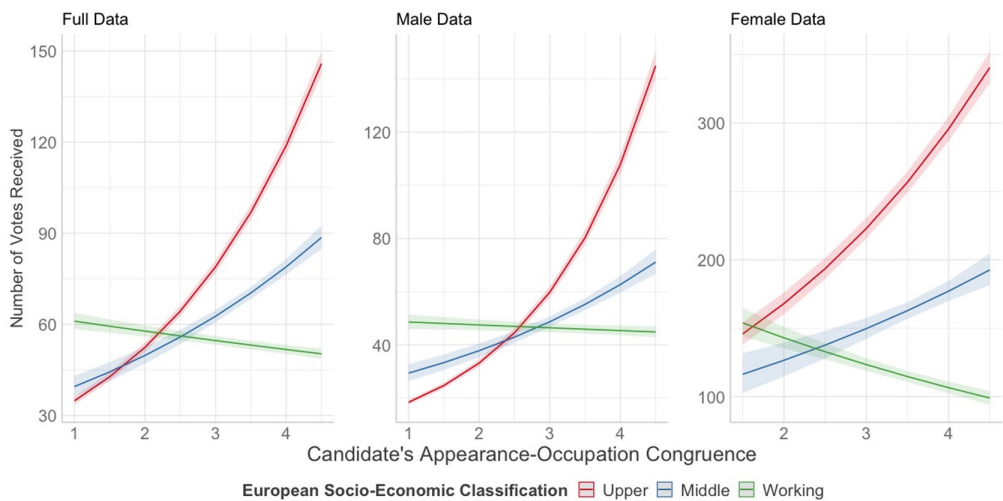
Before introducing our main results (Table 3 and Figure 3), we show our baseline models in Table 2. These models show the same variables considered in the main regression table but without the interaction term.<sup>19</sup> The idea is to suggest that our main interactive results are not a statistical artifact. As Table 2 suggests, all relevant variables are statistically significant and have a sizable effect and the expected sign. The first panel of Figure 3 shows the results for the complete data, and the second and third panels present the results for the male and female data, respectively. All specifications in Figure 3 and Table 3 widely suggest that Finnish citizens systematically vote for candidates who look like they have (and do have) upper-class occupations. In particular, the more a candidate looks middle or upper class, the more votes that candidate will receive. This is true for the full, male, and female data.

Importantly, the female data indicate that a systematic electoral penalty exists, especially for candidates who have, and look like they have, working-class occupations (panel 3 in Figure 3). Women candidates who have working-class occupations—but do *not* look like they do—have a predicted count of 154 votes; however, under the exact same circumstances, a similar female candidate who *does* look like she has a working-class occupation has a predicted count of 99 votes. This is a substantial and statistically significant 36% marginal change ( $p < .001$ ). To put these results in perspective, our findings are somewhat in line with Berggren et al. (2017), who found that in Finnish municipal elections, “a beauty increase of one standard deviation attracts about 20% more votes” (p. 80).

Interestingly, this working-class electoral penalty does *not* apply to men. A male candidate who has and looks like he has a working-class occupation has a predicted count of 45 votes

<sup>18</sup>An alternative to not splitting the data set by gender was to estimate a three-way interaction term. However, while mathematically possible, we consider three-way interaction terms not very common and hard to interpret.

<sup>19</sup>We thank one of the reviewers for this suggestion.



**FIGURE 3** The figure shows the marginal effects of the interaction term between physical appearance and social class on the number of votes candidates received. These effects were obtained from Equation (1) (in Table 3, Models 1, 2, and 3). Substantively, the figure shows that Finnish citizens systematically vote for candidates who look like they have and do have upper-class occupations. Furthermore, there exists a systematic electoral penalty, particularly for female candidates who look like they have and do have working-class occupations (panel 3).

versus 48 votes for a similar male candidate who does *not* look like he has a working-class job. Our analyses failed to find evidence that this change is meaningful at conventional levels of statistical significance. In simple terms, looking working class does not harm male candidates (panel 2 in Figure 3).

Clearly, then, “looking working class” substantively harms the electoral performance of political candidates, but female candidates more so. Though most research has previously noted the penalties to which women are subject when they perform a “man’s work” (Heilman et al., 2004, p. 416), in this article, we find both a gender penalty and a class penalty. As previously argued, characterized as an egalitarian society, Finland should be a “hard case” for finding results that might indicate statistically significant correlations between voting choices and physical appearance–based inequality. Yet, these empirical results come as uncomfortable evidence that Finns systematically avoid electing working-class-looking female candidates. We are not aware of similar findings in the existing literature.

Now we turn to our main regression table (Table 3). Since the literature has persistently found a strong correlation between attractiveness and voting, we performed additional estimations. Also, because masculinity and femininity might affect physical appearance–occupation congruence (e.g., men who work as secretaries or women who work in construction), several more models were estimated. Particularly, Models 4, 6, 7, 8, 11, and 12 include the attractiveness covariate for the different data sets (i.e., full, male, and female), alone as well as in combination with perceived masculinity or femininity levels (i.e., Models 5, 9, and 11, and 6, 10, and 12). Our interactive hypothesis systematically keeps its substantive effect size and statistical significance across all specifications. Importantly, attractiveness still explains a considerable amount of variance. Therefore, rather than providing alternative explanations for voting, this article presents a complementary story. Not only does attractiveness predict voting, as past research correctly argues, but physical appearance–based class status also matters.

Moving forward, Models 7 and 8 strongly suggest that attractiveness helps male candidates *more* than it does female candidates. This is in line with prior findings (Ditonto & Mattes, 2018, p. 430). For example, Kuwabara and Thébaud (2017, p. 1371) explain that “women seeking business loans were even *less* likely to receive funding if they were attractive.” All in all, the



TABLE 2 Physical appearance and voting in the 2017 Finnish municipal elections: Baseline models without the interaction term.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
	Full	Male	Female	Full	Full	Full	Male	Male	Male	Female	Female	Female
Intercept	5.08*** (.05)	3.40*** (.08)	6.63*** (.06)	2.41*** (.05)	4.90*** (.05)	4.93*** (.05)	.16 (.08)	3.34*** (.08)	1.68*** (.08)	3.51*** (.07)	6.89*** (.06)	3.27*** (.08)
Appearance- occupation congruence	.26*** (.00)	.40*** (.01)	.16*** (.01)	.15*** (.00)	.27*** (.00)	.25*** (.00)	.25*** (.01)	.40*** (.01)	.40*** (.01)	.13*** (.01)	.15*** (.01)	.18*** (.01)
Middle class	-.33*** (.01)	-.35*** (.01)	-.47*** (.01)	-.31*** (.01)	-.33*** (.01)	-.33*** (.01)	-.22*** (.01)	-.35*** (.01)	-.28*** (.01)	-.50*** (.01)	-.47*** (.01)	-.53*** (.01)
Working class	-.53*** (.01)	-.44*** (.01)	-.78*** (.01)	-.44*** (.01)	-.54*** (.01)	-.52*** (.01)	-.33*** (.01)	-.45*** (.01)	-.36*** (.01)	-.74*** (.01)	-.77*** (.01)	-.70*** (.01)
Age	-.02*** (.00)	-.01*** (.00)	-.03*** (.00)	-.00*** (.00)	-.02*** (.00)	-.02*** (.00)	.00*** (.00)	-.01*** (.00)	.00*** (.00)	-.01*** (.00)	-.03*** (.00)	-.02*** (.00)
Attractiveness				.78*** (.01)			1.03*** (.01)			.73*** (.01)		
Masculinity				.08*** (.00)				.02*** (.01)			-.19*** (.01)	
Femininity					.05*** (.00)				.54*** (.01)			.69*** (.01)
AIC	289962.26	172895.19	79620.46	268840.99	289492.30	289673.94	155861.99	172888.00	168386.44	73501.59	79392.16	74575.78
BIC	291184.00	173850.85	80436.78	270067.78	290719.26	290900.90	156822.34	173848.35	169346.78	74321.92	80212.82	75396.44
Log likelihood	-144747.13	-86243.60	-39622.23	-134185.50	-144511.15	-144601.97	-77726.00	-86239.00	-83988.22	-36561.80	-39507.08	-37098.89
Deviance	280978.73	167552.51	75663.61	259861.79	280506.76	280688.40	150517.31	167543.32	163041.75	69549.08	75433.31	70616.93
Observations	1,368	800	568	1,367	1,368	1,368	800	800	800	567	568	568

Note: Dependent variable is the number of votes each candidate received. City fixed effects and party variables are omitted. The reference category in the ESEC variable is "Upper Class." Given the symmetry of the derivatives, changing the reference category does not alter the interpretation of the results. Functional form is Poisson regression for all models.

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ .



working life–related outcomes of physical attractiveness (including elections) indicate that whereas social outcomes for men are positive and consistent, the same outcomes for women are inconsistent because attractive women can be both rewarded *and* penalized for how they look (Kukkonen et al., 2023).

## DISCUSSION

Studies of electoral preferences have long recognized the importance of candidates' physical attractiveness. However, other aspects of physical appearance receive very little attention. This article provides evidence that such emphasis generates an incomplete understanding of the significance of physical appearance for the likelihood of winning votes.

Previous studies argue that voters use heuristic shortcuts to make their voting decisions. Drawing from the expectation states theory, we argue that information about candidates' occupations, combined with information about candidates' physical appearance, function as cues for status that influence voting choices in low-information elections. Specifically, we show that Finnish citizens systematically vote for candidates who look like they have (and do have) upper-class occupations. Our results are rather uncomfortable. Since Finnish society is highly egalitarian, Finland serves as a “hard case” for unequal outcomes, improving the inferential leverage of our empirical findings. Also, more than providing an alternative explanation for voting based on physical attractiveness, our results present a complementary mechanism based on occupation-congruent physical appearance and inequality.

Moreover, occupation as one status characteristic interacts with another social category, namely, gender. We find that voters particularly penalize female candidates who have a working-class occupation and look like a representative of the working class. In other words, the “double cue of occupational status”—that is, a lower-status occupational title (first cue) combined with a low-status appearance (second cue)—especially concerns women in electoral contexts. These results are in line with previous studies of physical attractiveness and labor market outcomes, which have shown that for women, the consequences of physical appearance can be much more complex and severe at the same time (Frevert & Walker, 2014; Kukkonen et al., 2023; Kuwabara & Thébaud, 2017). In keeping with our empirical results, past research on voting and physical attractiveness also indicates that appearance matters more for female than for male candidates (Ditonto & Mattes, 2018). Our findings also reveal that as a status characteristic, being male compensates for the negative impact of male candidates' occupations. This may be related to the fact that in some left-wing parties, being a man and looking like a representative of the working class might serve as an advantage (see Berggren et al., 2017). Overall, our study suggests that expectation states theory is a useful theoretical framework for understanding how physical appearance, as a marker of occupational status, may be decisive in elections.

In terms of social inequalities and democracy, the results raise serious concerns. Official statistics show that women and elected representatives with working-class occupations are already underrepresented in municipal councils (Official Statistics Finland, 2017). At the same time, we showed that the physical appearance of working-class women further lowers their chances of receiving a higher vote count.

In many ways, our study is explorative, calling for more research on inequality and physical appearance and their importance for voting choices. First, though our design allows for a general description of the existence of the phenomenon, the mechanisms by which physical appearance produces social inequalities remain outside the scope of this study. One possible mechanism could include class voting—that is, the tendency of voters in a particular class to vote for a political candidate who looks like a representative of the same social class (e.g., Evans, 2000). Experimental designs might provide more insights into this possible causal link. Second, we approach our findings with caution. Although we consider our results to be innovative, it is

important to acknowledge that the connection between physical appearance, inequality, and elections may not hold true for all types of elections as it does in the Finnish context. For instance, in racially and ethnically diverse environments, the interpretation of a candidate's physical appearance may vary across different segments of society.

To address potential concerns about the generalizability of our findings, we suggest incorporating comparative designs in future research. These designs would involve comparing various countries and electoral settings, such as elections with differing levels of information availability. For instance, in countries characterized by higher income inequality and status competition, the impact of physical appearance on electoral outcomes may be even more significant than in relatively egalitarian countries like Finland (cf., Wilkinson & Pickett, 2020). By considering these factors collectively, our analyses indicate that physical appearance merits further exploration in future studies.

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