

Physical Appearance and Turnout in Finnish Elections: An Inequality Perspective

Hector Bahamonde ¹ Outi Sarpila ¹

¹University of Turku, Finland

April 7th, 2022

- **Motivate the problem:** It's clear that the **better the candidate's looks, the higher the turnout.**
- **Gaps in the literature:** The literature *only* looks at candidate attractiveness, which is just *one* dimension of physical appearance.
- Our paper:
 - **Beyond attractiveness:** explore the degree in which **a candidate's occupation is congruent with his/her physical appearance.**
 - **Inequality perspective:** Study how the candidate's perceived **social class** affects turnout.
- **Empirics:** we exploit a novel data set of candidate's physical appearance in the context of the 2017 Finnish Municipal Elections.
- **Results:** we find that there exists a systematic electoral penalty for female candidates that look-like and also hold working-class occupations.

Good-looking Candidates do Better in Elections

- Better-looking candidates are more likely to win elections.
- Dion et al. (1972) we know that “beautiful is good” and that “voters vote beautiful” (Efrain and Patterson, 1974).



“What Are Good-Looking Candidates?” (Stockemer and Praino, 2019)

Nixon-Kennedy 1960 Debate

- Nixon's "five-o'clock" shadow largely affected voter evaluations.

Mattes et. al (2010).



Nixon-Kennedy 1960 Debate

- Nixon's "five-o'clock" shadow largely affected voter evaluations.

Mattes et. al (2010).

- Nixon didn't look right.



Nixon-Kennedy 1960 Debate

- Nixon's "five-o'clock" shadow largely affected voter evaluations.

Mattes et. al (2010).

- Nixon didn't look right.
- And was all sweaty.

Stockemer and Praino (2019).



Nixon-Kennedy 1960 Debate

- Nixon's "five-o'clock" shadow largely affected voter evaluations.

Mattes et. al (2010).

- Nixon didn't look right.
- And was all sweaty.

Stockemer and Praino (2019).

- Radio listeners thought Nixon would win, while TV-watchers though Kennedy would.



Gaps in the Current Literature

- While the literature has advanced our knowledge in a number of ways, its focus has been on just attractiveness.
- We believe that physical *appearance* goes way beyond than just physical *attractiveness*.
- Even while some have studied how “looking *competent*” (and not necessarily “*beautiful*”) helps candidates winning elections, there are a number of unanswered questions.
- Importantly, a number of these unexplored questions touch upon issues of social stratification.
- For example, *Does it matter for turnout if the candidate looks like a working-class individual as opposed to a white-collar individual?*

Our Paper

- Studies the electoral consequences for candidates of looking “upper-class,” “middle-class” or “working-class.”
- Exploits a novel data set comprised of a representative sample of the Finnish population ($N=7,920$). In these data, participants rated a subsample of photos of political candidates ($N=1,415$) according to several physical appearance measurements.
- We find that there exists a systematic electoral penalty, particularly for female candidates, that look-like and also hold working-class occupations.

Political Psychology

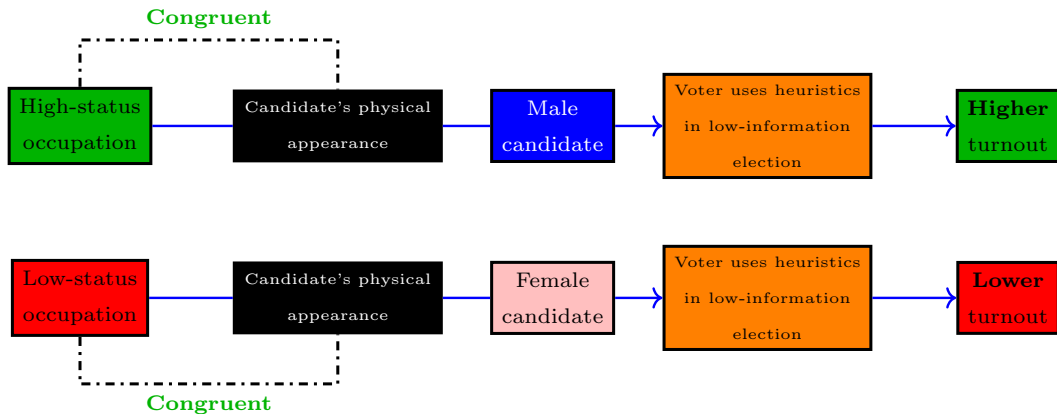
- A candidate's **physical appearance** is “the most important” (Lau & Redlawsk 2001) and the “most obvious and accessible” (Dion et al. 1972) *heuristic* available to voters (Stockemer & Praino 2017).
- **Heuristics** allows reasonable voting decision making with minimal cognitive effort.
- Thus, “voters vote beautiful” (Efrain & Patterson 1974) because attractive candidates “are more likely to be attributed the qualities associated with successful politicians” (Stockemer & Praino 2019).

Expectation States Theory

- **Expectation States Theory:** physical appearance, gender and occupation “cue social categories and signify social status” making them all a “locus of inequality.”
 - “sexual attractiveness” is a gender-specific status symbol: physical attractiveness intersects with gender producing unfavorable outcomes for women.

Argument

1. Differences between social groups (gender, occupation, race, etc.) are translated into social inequalities.
2. For instance, women are more likely to get penalized because of how they look.
3. In the context of low-information elections, a candidate with a lower status is faced with lower performance expectation, that is, lower turnout.
4. Since voters use heuristics, they will elect more systematically high-status male candidates than similar female candidates.



Finland: A Hard Case

- We follow a “**least-likely case design**” (Levy 2008). Finland has been consistently considered as:
 - A democratic (Polity-V).
 - An economic egalitarian (Walzl 2022).
 - A gender egalitarian.
 - A social-mobility prone country (Erola 2009).
 - Having low-information Municipal Elections (Berggren et al. 2010 and 2017).
- Thus, it should be **hard to find** a correlation between class-congruent use of status symbols and turnout.

...and yet, we *do*.

Several Sources

- Test.