Physical Appearance and Elections: An Inequality Perspective

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**Abstract**

There seems to be a consensus that physically attractive individuals earn more and win elections more often. Unfortunately, very little is known about how voters evaluate candidates with socioeconomically unequal “looks.” To bridge this gap, we study the electoral consequences of looking upper-class, middle-class, or working-class for candidates. Using official electoral data for the 2017 Finnish municipal elections and the European Socio-Economic Classification, we classified candidates' occupations. We also constructed a novel dataset based on a representative sample of the Finnish population (N=7,920). The participants rated a subsample of high-quality photographs of political candidates (N=1,415) according to several physical appearance measurements (attractiveness and congruence between physical appearance and occupation). Our analyses suggest that Finnish citizens systematically vote for candidates that show higher degrees of congruence between physical appearance and occupation, particularly candidates that look like they have upper-class occupations and do have them. Furthermore, the data suggest that there exists a systematic electoral penalty, particularly for female candidates that look like they have working-class occupations and do have them.

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Introduction

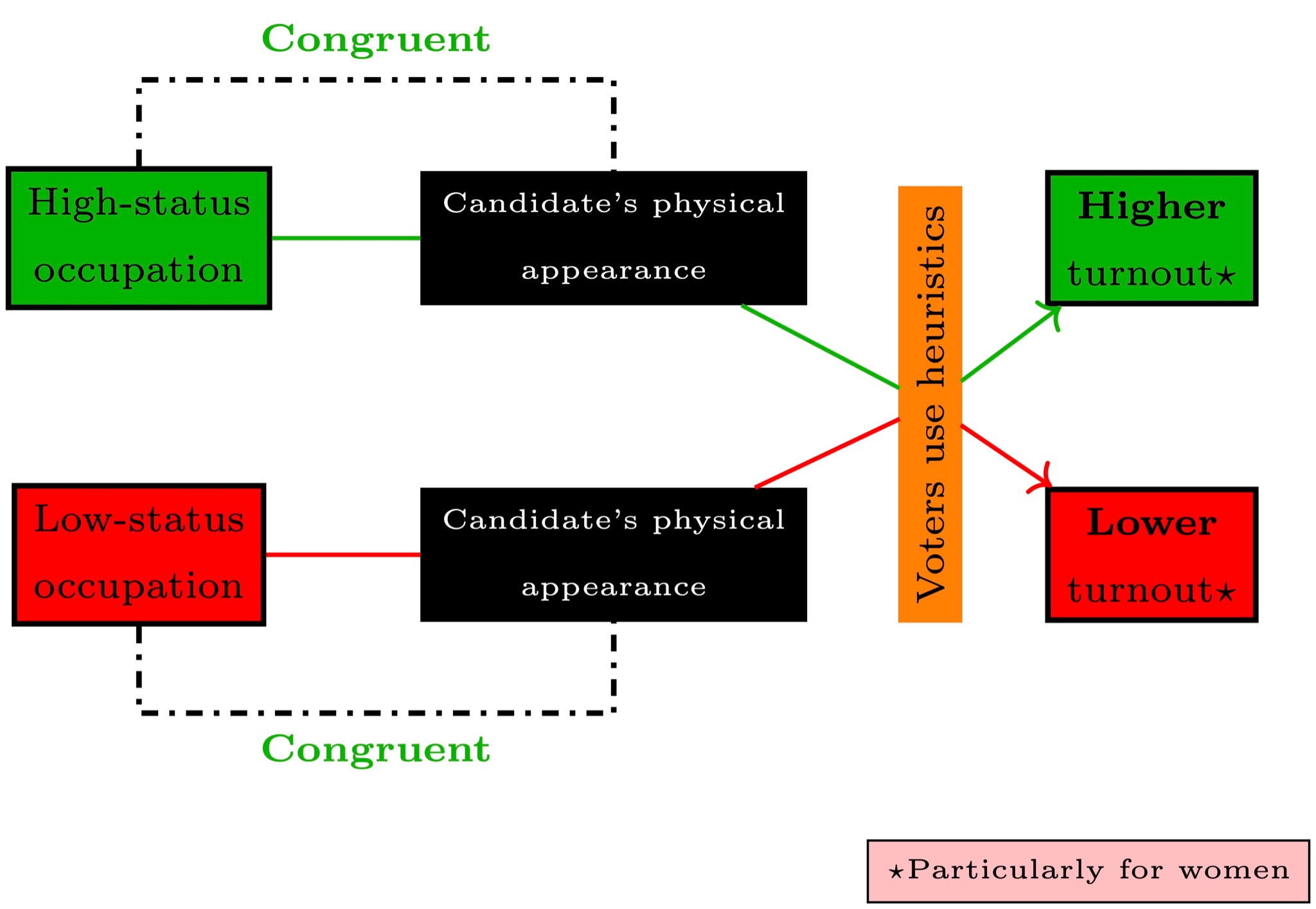
Previous studies on physical attractiveness and social and economic outcomes have convincingly shown that physical appearance–based social inequalities are embedded in various fields of life, including marital life [(Jæger, 2011; McClintock, 2014)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?MZIt4Q) and labor markets (for a review, see [Hamermesh, 2011; Maestripieri et al., 2017)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?Y9bDYk). Along the same lines, political scientists have consistently shown that a political candidate’s physical attractiveness is positively associated with electoral success [(Dion et al., 1972; Efrain & Patterson, 1974; Stockemer & Praino, 2019; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?g7keAg). Examples range from high-information electoral events, such as the well-studied Kennedy-Nixon 1960 presidential debate [(Mattes et al., 2010)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?EQup9c), to low-information elections [(Berggren et al., 2017)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?dGP6PX), such as municipal elections.

In this paper, we suggest that previous research has concentrated almost exclusively on the effect of physical attractiveness on turnout. That is, notwithstanding the increasing interest in the positive effects of physical attractiveness on turnout, the effect of physical appearance–based inequalities on voting remains relatively understudied. This is a rather important yet understudied question. Substantively, we note that attractiveness is just *one* dimension of physical appearance, neglecting other important related aspects, such as the degree to which a candidate’s occupation is congruent with his/her physical appearance. For example, going beyond physical attractiveness, we do not know whether poor-looking candidates perform worse or better in elections when running against wealthy-looking candidates and whether this potential relationship varies by gender. Overall, we contend that the intertwined role of physical appearance and social stratification on turnout has been completely overlooked, leaving an important gap in the literature. Since individual perceptions of candidates inform voting decisions ([Lau & Redlawsk, 2001)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?WPRast), which have vast political consequences, for instance, on the formation and dissolution of governments, we believe that these are serious questions that must be addressed.

Building on the theory of status characteristics and expectation states in sociology [(Monk et al., 2021; Ridgeway, 2011; Webster & Driskell, 1983)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?bQn04U), we suggest that the returns of physical attractiveness vary considerably by subgroup, that is, by combinations of status characteristics [(Jæger, 2011; Kuwabara & Thébaud, 2017; Monk et al., 2021; Webster & Driskell, 1983)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?BwGEFz).[[2]](#footnote-2) Sociologists have consistently shown that physical appearance produces different (unequal) outcomes [(Pajunen et al., 2021)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?K2Aw9u) and have pointed to various social mechanisms underlying appearance-based inequalities [(e.g., Kuipers, 2015; Mears, 2015)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?TYeh72). This paper provides new insights into physical appearance and social inequality by analyzing the interplay of four status characteristics of political candidates: real occupation, physical appearance-based occupational cues, physical attractiveness, and gender.

Drawing from political science studies of the use of heuristics in elections [(Tversky & Kahneman, 1973; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?pIz9VX) and the status characteristics theory in sociology [(Webster & Driskell, 1983)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?zVRYtx), we argue that information about a candidate’s occupation and physical appearance works as status cues (Stockemer & Praino, 2017). These “cheap” heuristic shortcuts have an effect on turnout, particularly in low-information elections. Importantly, because women are more likely to be penalized because of how they look [(Pajunen et al., 2021)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?UH0vHq), 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 should perform better in low-information elections than women candidates, especially if the candidate looks like he/she has a low-status occupation and does have one (see Figure 1).

### Figure 1: Empirical Expectations



Leveraging these literatures, we use the case of the political campaigns for 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, middle-class, or working-class occupation and indeed having one—affects turnout for a candidate. We designed our case study based on a high-quality dataset comprising a subsample of high-quality photographs of political candidates in the 2017 Finnish municipal elections (N=1,412). Critically, Finnish candidates use posters that display the candidate’s name, headshot, and occupation as the main way of political campaigning. Using these picture and occupational data, we constructed a novel dataset in which a representative sample of Finns (N=7,920) rated the degree to which a candidate’s occupation was congruent with his/her physical appearance. Finally, those data were matched with the number of votes each candidate received. Our findings suggest two main points. First, Finnish citizens systematically vote for candidates that display higher levels of congruence between their physical appearance and occupation, in particular candidates that look like they have and do have upper-class occupations. Second, there is a systematic electoral penalty for candidates who look like they have and do have working-class occupations, especially female ones. That is, Finns systematically punish working-class candidates in the voting booth, but even more so if the candidate is female and working-class.

We selected Finland as our case because Finnish society is highly egalitarian. Thus, our results are rather uncomfortable. Moreover, since this country is a “hard case” for unequal outcomes, our “least-likely case design” [(Levy, 2008)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?eHgTu6) improves the inferential leverage of our empirical findings. From a broader perspective, more than providing an alternative explanation for voting based on physical attractiveness, we contribute to the literature by presenting a complementary mechanism based on occupation-congruent physical appearance and inequality.

We contribute to the field in several ways. First, by introducing the expectation-states theory [(Webster & Driskell, 1983)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?oV7Mir) into the political science literature, we hope to bridge the current gap between physical appearance and inequality [(Kalick, 1988; Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994; Belmi & Neale, 2014)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?4B8yss). Second, this paper seeks to contribute to the candidate evaluation literature in political science, particularly by presenting an alternative framework used by voters, namely, evaluations based on cues that go beyond physical attractiveness [(Berggren et al., 2010)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?AM8Loq). Third, given that this paper takes into account gender differences, our results contribute to the study of social discrimination against women in politics [(Ditonto & Mattes, 2018; Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2020)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?WKg16e). Finally, from a measurement perspective, this paper introduces a new method for measuring congruence between physical appearance and occupation [(Sarpila et al., 2021)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?o7ZtOF), a concept largely ignored in the literature on physical appearance and candidate evaluation.

This paper is organized as follows. First, we discuss the literature on heuristics and candidate evaluation to frame physical appearance as one of the main heuristics available to voters for evaluating candidates. Second, we introduce the expectation-states theory, a theoretical framework developed by sociologists to explain the relationship between physical appearance and inequality. This section links appearance with social class and economic inequality. We then present our case, data, and statistical models before describing our results. Finally, we conclude, restating the main findings of this paper and outlining its limitations.

The Use of Heuristics in Voting: The Role of Physical Attractiveness

The political science literature confirmed long ago the stylized fact that physically attractive political candidates fare better in elections. As [Schubert et al. (2011, p. 34](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?7vrxjA)) put it, “[b]eing physically attractive matters for electoral success.” This relationship has been established since [Dion et al. (1972)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?iHc6Ma) coined the then *axiom* of “beautiful is good.” 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)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?Lt4yAo). Therefore, the relationship between looks and turnout is not only old [(Ditonto & Mattes, 2018, p. 430)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?2WmmRM) but also strong. For instance, [Berggren et al. (2017, p. 79](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?k1w0P4)) note that it is “*well established* that politicians with an appealing appearance win more votes in elections,”[[3]](#footnote-3) 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)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?MlUNqW).[[4]](#footnote-4) 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)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?gqYrwI).[[5]](#footnote-5)

This idea is well established in other disciplines as well. Daniel Hamermesh’s bestseller *Beauty Pays* [(2011)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?PbDRIT) explains that attractive people are systematically more successful [(see also Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994; Scholz & Sicinski, 2015)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?JxJDvB). In a similar vein, within sociology, social stratification researchers have analyzed the link between attractiveness and income [(e.g., Jæger, 2011; Kuwabara & Thébaud, 2017; McClintock, 2014; Monk et al., 2021; Wong & Penner, 2016)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?9q3Jgb), as well as the unequal treatment of individuals and socio-economic discrimination [(for a discussion, see, e.g., Hamermesh, 2011)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?COWYQb).

Overall, the reason why physically attractive political candidates fare better in elections is partly that voters inevitably make inferences about political candidates based on their physical appearance. For example, [Mattes et al. (2010, p. 41)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?Hg1Ar2) note that candidates that look more likely to be physically threatening lost 65% of real elections. Consequently, while some political economists have argued that voters behave “rationally” (see, for example, [Bartels, 1996; Shepsle, 1997)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?SSe3fA), political psychologists usually find that human emotions often enhance voters’ ability to engage in meaningful political deliberation [(Marcus & MacKuen, 1993, p. 672)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?m9obEU). Some have even argued that “perceptions of candidates are generally focused on ‘personality’ characteristics rather than on issue concerns or partisan group connections” [(Miller et al., 1986, p. 521)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?vLZN7s), a trait that tends to hold across different cultures. For instance, [Lawson et al. (2010)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?61TmFj) report that American and Indian experimental subjects predicted election results in Mexico and Brazil purely based on pictures of the candidates.

Within this literature, it is argued that physical appearance is used as a “heuristic” by voters to make inferences about political candidates. Heuristics are “problem-solving strategies'' used by voters [(Lau & Redlawsk, 2001, p. 952)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?C93i7K) to reduce the complex tasks of assessing political information, mainly due to the limits of the human cognitive capacity [(Tversky & Kahneman, 1974, p. 3; Miller et al., 1986, p. 523)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?G7bclh). In fact, a candidate’s physical appearance is “the most important” [(Lau & Redlawsk, 2001, p. 954)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?zi9Ki5) and the “most obvious and accessible” [(Dion et al., 1972, p. 285)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?VHUAk3) heuristic available to voters and, overall, the “major source of information” [(Todorov et al., 2005, p. 1623)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?jpT70O) when evaluating candidates [(Lawson et al., 2010, p. 563)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?e0qNT8). Part of the reason why physical appearance is the most used heuristic is that voters can easily use it as a cognitive shortcut to compensate for a lack of information [(Rosar et al., 2008, p. 64](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?93I6ra); importantly, see [Hart et al., 2011)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?46bN2Y). Therefore, voters look at photographs of the candidates [(Banducci et al., 2008, p. 903)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?Zb2Us7) or “watch a good deal of TV” [(Lenz & Lawson, 2011, p. 575)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?oEVuVf) because the way that candidates look provides cues in low-information elections. In sum, and as [Riggle et al. (1992, p. 67)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?5aVKU8) put it, “[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 been proven to help voters 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)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?ujxL4b) 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)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?EFMWFu) explain that facial cues loom larger in decision making once more important but harder-to-get information becomes available. Finally, heuristics are not only important when a large amount of information is available but also when more and better political information is needed to make a decision. For example, going to the polls more frequently increases voter fatigue, making voters rely even more on heuristics [(Praino et al., 2014)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?dV6krx). All in all, voters use heuristics because it allows them to make reasonable voting decisions with minimal cognitive effort and makes them “vote correctly,” especially for voters that already have access to some political information [(Lau & Redlawsk, 2001)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?Kf2EcI).

We posit that “voters vote beautiful” [(Efrain & Patterson, 1974)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?FyKL2P) because attractiveness serves as a heuristic for something else. For instance, [Banducci et al. (2008, p. 903)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?ZtV2V1) 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)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?I9tb8o), and are perceived as more competent and trustworthy [(Berggren et al., 2010, p. 8)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?ooOHxc). Thus, attractiveness is associated with attributes [(Mattes et al., 2010)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?tVNLt2) and personality traits [(Banducci et al., 2008)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?de3dBO) that are desirable in politicians, such as honesty, productivity, or conservatism [(Berggren et al., 2017)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?fNFo1N).

Unfortunately, most studies in political science fail to see this association as it relates to inequality and social stratification. Barring very few exceptions, physical attractiveness has been studied in the context of the perceived socio-economic status of candidates [(Kalick, 1988; Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994; Belmi & Neale, 2014)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?IdcVCf). For instance, [Berggren et al. (2010, p. 9)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?ZbolJN) explain that “occupation and education serve as signals of competence,” while [Price et al. (2011, p. 636)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?EObK7F) point out that physically attractive individuals tend to be “less egalitarian.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Consequently, although much progress has been made in this area of research, we find it limiting that most studies exclusively reference physical attractiveness, neglecting other aspects of physical appearance that might also explain turnout. In this paper, we focus on the relationship between looking/being working-class/wealthy and gender. The next section discusses theoretical advances in sociology regarding the relationship between physical appearance, social status, and inequality. The idea is to contribute to the political science literature by expanding the conceptual framework exploited in the paper.

Physical Appearance as a Locus of Social Status

Social stratification research has drawn on status characteristics and expectation-states theory, which consider attractiveness a diffuse status characteristic. The general expectation-states theory argues that attractive individuals are seen as “better” and “more capable” than those perceived as less attractive. Accordingly, physical attractiveness is similar to status characteristics such as gender, race, and occupation, which form the basis for the unequal treatment of people [(Frevert & Walker, 2014; see also Webster & Driskell, 1983, for a review)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?FonyBn).

How categorical differences are (although not always) translated into status distinctions has been described in more depth by Cecilia Ridgeway’s influential theory of status beliefs. She and her colleagues have convincingly shown how categorical differences between social groups in terms of—*inter alia­—*gender, occupation, and race are translated into social inequalities between social groups through *status beliefs*. The inequality-producing mechanism of status takes place in social interactions, where cultural beliefs regarding which social groups are more capable and agentic are activated, contributing to discrimination and reproducing social inequalities [(Correll & Ridgeway, 2006; Ridgeway, 2011, 2014; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?AlTQnB). Cultural beliefs are shared stereotypes whose significance is actualized in social situations as people combine social categories with evaluative judgments [(Ridgeway, 2011, 2014; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?Qq3aFX). In the context of elections, this means that candidates with lower status are faced with an expectation of lower performance, that is, lower turnout. Thus, they are also less likely to be given opportunities to perform and take care of collective tasks, consequently receiving fewer votes.

It is widely recognized in stratification research that the title of an occupation *per se* is a strong status characteristic, contributing to the individual’s prestige and shaping his/her access to positive evaluations. Given the long tradition of classifying occupations according to prestige [(Treiman, 1977)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?igYqtQ), socio-economic status [(Ganzeboom et al., 1992)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?lxL1fg), and social class [(Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?PZfN4z), occupational ordering has been sometimes called the “backbone” of stratification research [(Ganzeboom & Treiman, 1996, p. 202)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?jVdZ1S). Therefore, several efforts have been made towards the international standardization of occupational categorizations, such as the ISCO project [(Ganzeboom, 2010; Ganzeboom & Treiman, 1996)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?ZdhJgi), as well as social class schemas, including the European Socio-Economic Classification (ESeC) [(Rose & Harrison, 2007)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?lB6tbF) and the European Socio-Economic Groups (EseG) [(Meron et al., 2014)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?b1b1pk) projects. What sociologists in the field of social stratification have neglected, however, is the physical component of occupational status.

Ultimately, physical appearance more generally, not just in terms of facial and/or body attractiveness, “cue social categories and signify social status,” making physical appearance a “potentially critical locus of inequality” [(Monk et al., 2021, p. 196)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?rq97IV). Although often overlooked in contemporary studies of social stratification, the social stratification of physical appearances was an important concern in the pioneering work of Max Weber on status [(Weber, 1978, pp. 305–307, 926–937)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?qDEKHz) as well as Thorstein Veblen’s analysis of conspicuous consumption and status attainment[(Veblen, 1994)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?mGs0yr). Additionally, Ervin Goffman [(1951)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?kbYFrG) paid particular attention to physical appearance in his analysis of “symbols of class status.” According to him, there is a shared knowledge of status symbols that form the basis for status differentiation (and integration). The use of status symbols is far from random. Instead, behavior follows shared social rules, with different types of devices encouraging the class-congruent use of status symbols. For Goffman, these devices restrict “misrepresentation” or the “fraudulent” use of the symbols. Thus, we hypothesize that occupational status *per se*, combined with physical appearance-based symbols of occupational status, forms a double cue of status, which might become decisive in voting (see Figure 1). Some decades after Goffman’s analysis, Pierre Bourdieu famously analyzed the intertwinement of social class and physical appearance. According to Bourdieu (1984), class taste becomes materialized in the body, although he also recognized beauty as a form of “gift of nature” [(Bourdieu, 1984, p. 204)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?joJKUE). Moreover, very recent research has shown that appearance-based cues of social class make a difference, for instance, in “filtering in” certain job candidates in some labor markets [(De Keere, 2021; Friedman & Laurison, 2020; Mears, 2011)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?eNel5F). Furthermore, sociologists have recently shown that young children are already able to classify other people into occupational status categories using dress and other attributes of physical appearance as cues [(Vandebroeck, 2021)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?LFAZpE). A similar process of occupational status recognition and “filtering in” likely takes place in low-information political elections.

However, it is widely acknowledged that physical appearance-based status characteristics cannot be examined without taking gender into account [(Kuwabara & Thébaud, 2017; Monk et al., 2021; Sarpila et al., 2020, 2021)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?DfGyGI). Again, according to the theory of status beliefs, gender is considered the primary cultural frame that people use to classify each other [(Ridgeway, 2011)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?KDx21E). Goffman (1951) already suggested that attractiveness is a gender-specific status symbol, whose use is nonetheless limited by moral restrictions. More recent empirical research has shown that physical attractiveness intersects with gender, producing unfavorable outcomes for women [(Frevert & Walker, 2014; Heilman & Eagly, 2008; Kuwabara & Thébaud, 2017)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?KDLSZ2). More specifically, a recent review of the socio-economic 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 [(Pajunen et al., 2021)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?YY6XC4). Furthermore, studies on double standards have suggested that social rules in terms of taking advantage of and benefitting from one’s physical appearance are different for men and women; 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 than men engaging in the same behavior [(Kukkonen et al., 2018; Sarpila et al., 2020)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?JaIONL). In sum, we expect that occupational looks as a status characteristic interact with gender in political contexts as well (see Figure 1).

Empirical Analyses and Results

### Case and Data

In Finland, municipal elections are held every four years to elect municipal councilors. There are 293 municipalities in continental Finland and 16 in the Province of Åland (an autonomous archipelago region).[[7]](#footnote-7) The number of councilors is determined by the local council itself, but a minimum is set in each municipality based on municipal population size. Finnish municipal elections use the D’Hondt electoral system, in which citizens vote for candidates running on party lists. The candidates are then ranked according to the votes they receive. Seats are then filled in proportion to the total votes received by each list. In Finland, municipalities provide basic public services such as daycare, health care, education, and water and waste management, *inter alia*.

Finland is a very suitable case to study the effect of physical appearance on turnout. First, Finnish municipal elections are low-information elections, that is, they do not attract broad media coverage [(Berggren et al., 2017, p. 80)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?DMkr0u). Second, as [Berggren et al. (2017, p. 83)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?q3FPfL) explain, political “[a]dvertising 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 country [(Marshall & Jaggers, 2020)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?VoVNKD), as well as a country with high levels of economic equality [(Waltl, 2022)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?mX9d6n), gender equality [(e.g., Lohmann & Zagel, 2016)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?0kpQfq), and social mobility between parents and children [(Erola, 2009)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?PiGRCZ). Therefore, Finland is a “hard case” for finding any correlation between class-congruent physical appearance and turnout. We believe that exploiting a “least-likely case design” [(Levy, 2008)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?REtFU1) should offer more inferential leverage in the study of elections, physical appearance, social stratification, and inequality.

Several data sources were exploited. First, political campaigns in the context of Finnish municipal elections use headshots of the candidates running for office along with their name and party affiliation. This information is public and shown in city centers, bus stops, public squares, and other highly frequented places, including voting booths [(Berggren et al., 2010, p. 12)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?zVOvir). Importantly, the *same* photos are also displayed in newspaper ads [(Berggren et al., 2010, p. 10)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?ldS57U), 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)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?6ZtZ5R). Second, the Department for Democracy and Public Law under the Ministry of Justice (http://www.vaalit.fi) collects this visual information, along with each candidate’s turnout, electoral district, age, and occupation (declared by the candidates).[[8]](#footnote-8) For the 2017 Finnish municipal elections, a subsample of Finnish political candidates was collected. Out of 33,618 candidates, over 10,000 photographs were collected.[[9]](#footnote-9) Among the available pictures, 1,500 images were randomly selected. The subsample was selected 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, data from the Official Statistics of Finland Office (https://www.stat.fi) was analyzed in parallel. The final dataset consists of 1,415 photographs. Taking the candidate pictures and occupational data as a starting point, and following the ESeC [(Harrison & Rose, 2006)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?dJ4GHk), we coded each candidate’s occupation by class (i.e., “upper,” “middle,” and “working class”).

Most if not all politicians know that “physical appearance has a meaningful impact on political power” [(Keating et al., 1999, p. 594)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?mtG3r7). Hence, we have good reasons to believe that the majority of candidates tried to maximize the likability of their physical appearance for the photograph. In fact, the use of pictures is so widespread that, in Finland, “[a]ll parties make extensive use of posters that display the names and photos of all candidates in the district” [(Berggren et al., 2010, p. 10)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?20yzkC). Therefore, taking a random sample of candidate pictures does not threaten our identification strategy.

In addition, we constructed a novel dataset of physical appearance ratings using a representative sample of Finnish citizens. First, a random sample of 26,500 Finnish-speaking Finns aged 18-64 years was drawn 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 were given a different survey URL in the invitations. In total, 7,920 raters participated in the survey.

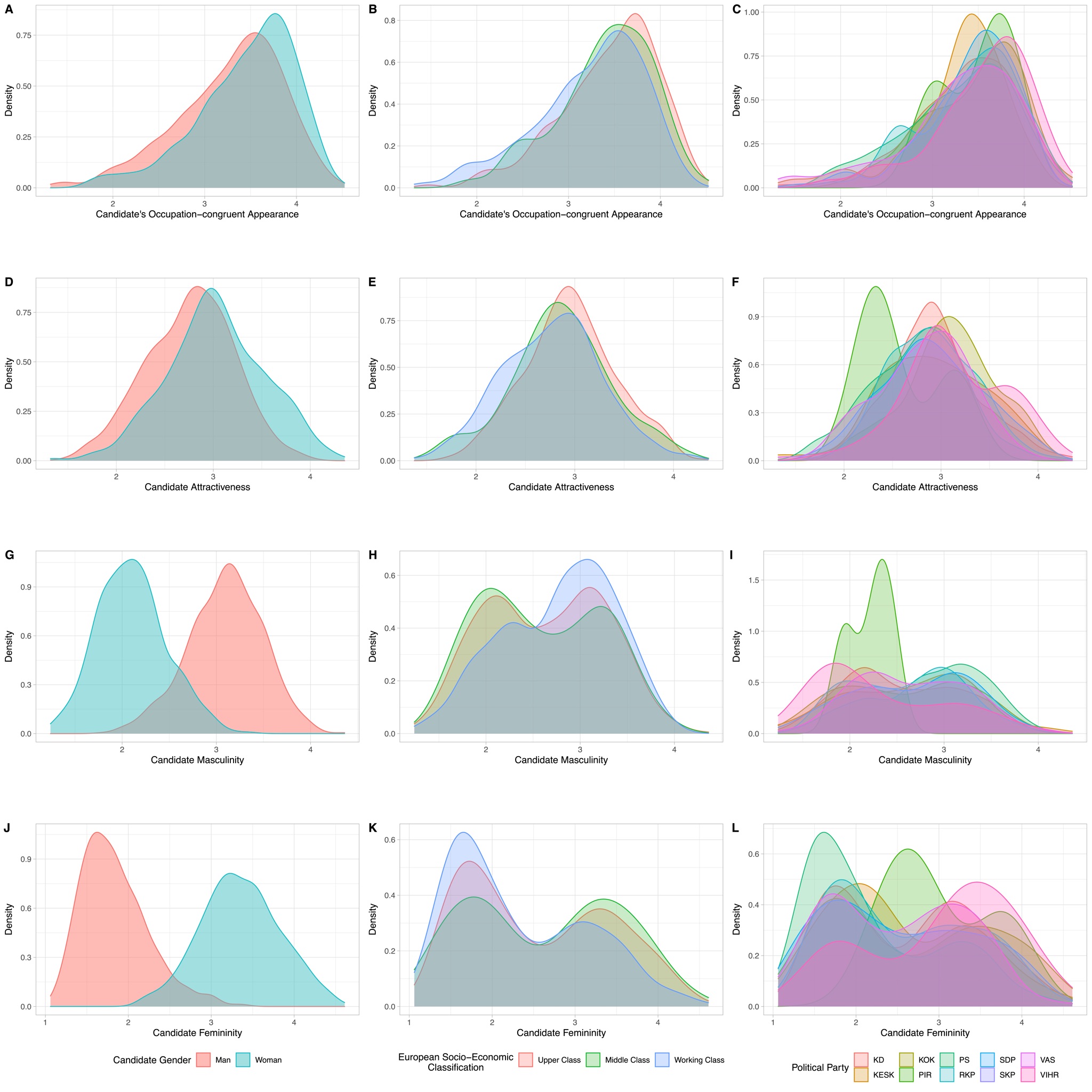
#### Table 1: Attributes Assigned to Raters by Sampling Criteria and Answer Set

| **Sample** | **Attribute** | **Question** | **Answer Set** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 1 | Occupation-Congruent Appearance | *To what extent does this person correspond to your image of someone working in [occupation]?* | 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 | *In your opinion, how attractive does this person look compared to others of the same age and gender?* | 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)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?cSnzJI). |
| 3 | Masculinity | *To what extent do you think that this person looks masculine compared to others of the same age and gender?* | From 1 = not masculine at all to 5 = very masculine [(e.g., Hoss et al., 2005)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?pkRTd9). |
| 4 | Femininity | *To what extent do you think that this person looks feminine compared to others of the same age and gender?* | From 1 = not feminine at all to 5 = very feminine. |

The raters were asked to assess a random subsample of political candidates according to several measurements: Sample 1 evaluated the congruence between physical appearance and occupation, Sample 2 attractiveness, Sample 3 masculinity,[[10]](#footnote-10) and Sample 4 femininity.[[11]](#footnote-11) Consequently, the attribute on which raters evaluated their random sample of photographs differed between the four samples. In practice, each of the 7,920 raters evaluated 50 candidate photographs assigned at random. Figure 2 presents the distribution after averaging the 7,920 scores of the 1,415 candidates [(see also Rosar et al., 2008, p. 71; Berggren et al., 2010, p. 11)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?pHfqRZ). The figure shows these densities broken down by relevant criteria.[[12]](#footnote-12) Finally, Table 1 summarizes the question asked to raters and the set of answers.

To randomly assign pictures to raters, a rating tool for surveys was specially developed (anonymized). 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, images for which over half of the respondents chose the option “I recognize the person in the photograph” were excluded from the analysis (N = 4). To isolate evaluations between the different photographs, a neutral screen with a simple black university logo on a white background appeared. Importantly, there was no time limit for evaluating each picture. The literature on candidate evaluation consistently affirms that “photographs allow voters to form first impressions” about candidates [(Banducci et al., 2008, p. 904)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?bCh64u), thus voters do not update their initial inferences even when new information is available [(Antonakis & Dalgas, 2009, p. 1183)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?OMr9FQ). This “perceptual bias” has been identified in studies with 1-second exposure to facial appearance [(Todorov et al., 2005, p. 1623)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?0wlS7G). In fact, [Mattes et al. (2010, p. 43)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?hQRCS6) find that “judgments made at 100 milliseconds correlated highly with judgments with no time constraints,” while [Antonakis and Dalgas (2009)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?yY2wOB) 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.

All in all, we believe that this novel dataset relying on raters representative at the country level has clear advantages over other designs that rely on convenience samples, which may be seen as the norm in research on physical appearance [(see, for instance, Rosar et al., 2008; Mattes et al., 2010; Wigginton & Stockemer, 2021)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?DtGjPk). While the relationship between physical appearance and turnout has already been studied in Finland [(e.g., Berggren et al., 2010, 2017)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?MP1vGp), the authors are not aware of any other study that exploited a representative sample of raters in the context of real (not mock) elections.

**Figure 2: Distribution of Physical Appearance Indexes Broken Down by Relevant Criteria**

### Statistical Analyses

The analyses presented in this section try to explain turnout. The statistical objective is to explain the variance in the number of votes that each candidate received. From a substantive point of view, this kind of variable has already been studied in the same form, also in the context of physical appearance [(Efrain & Patterson, 1974)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?nCoq84). From a methodological standpoint, we follow the statistical literature and identify the data-generating process of the dependent variable—turnout—as a Poisson distribution [(Long, 1997)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?LOZfaA).[[13]](#footnote-13)

Since this paper focuses primarily on the *combined* effects of physical appearance-occupation congruence *and* social class, the main independent variable is an interaction term between these two covariates. Following [Brambor et al. (2006)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?PNkVXf), both the multiplicative and constitutive terms were included and we also analyze the marginal effects, not the regression table [(2006, p. 71)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?RYuYV2). This is particularly important when estimating generalized linear models because (1) the interaction effect could be non-zero, even when the estimation indicates that it is zero, and (2) 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)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?q5nA8m). Hence, this section concentrates on the plot of the marginal effect of the predicted effects of physical appearance-occupation congruence *and* social class on turnout.

Several control variables were included in the model. Since party affiliation is one of the main explanatory factors of turnout [(Bartels, 2000; Lau & Redlawsk, 2006)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?rOHM6g), an indicator variable for party was considered.[[14]](#footnote-14) In addition, because certain occupations might be age-specific, age was included as another control variable. This is also relevant because age might have an impact on the respondent’s perception of the candidate when evaluating the congruence between his/her physical appearance and occupation. Including age is also particularly relevant because physiognomic cues—such as age—set in motion social and political expectations, effectively signaling “traits that accompany the status of age, including dominance and strength” [(Keating et al., 1999, p. 594)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?IuxH4R). Finally, to account for unobserved but fixed omitted variables, city fixed effects were included in all models. By pursuing this econometric strategy, the model aims at keeping constant at their means city-specific factors such as population size, different political cleavages (urban/rural, language, etc.), local party competition issues, as well as possible incumbency/contestation dynamics, among other hard-to-measure confounding factors [(Angrist & Pischke, 2009)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?0H4a72). To rule out the possibility that the results presented in this paper are not exclusively a function of perceived attractiveness and/or masculinity or femininity levels, several other models were estimated, controlling for those covariates 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)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?piFpWa), and that “attractiveness matters most for women candidates” [(Banducci et al., 2008, p. 906; but see Ditonto & Mattes, 2018, p. 430)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?zCWBm5), the data were partitioned by gender. All in all, 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)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?y8SyeH). To take advantage of these issues, the same model was used to exploit the complete data (i.e., men and women combined), the men-only data, and the women-only data separately. We consider it an empirical advantage because most experimental work on physical appearance and voting research “do not systematically consider the gender of the candidates involved” ([Ditonto & Mattes, 2018, p. 431)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?nm7tNs).

The main results are plotted in Figure 3. The first panel shows the results for the complete data, while the second and third panels present the results for the men’s and women’s data, respectively. All specifications widely suggest that Finnish citizens systematically vote for candidates with higher degrees of congruence between physical appearance and occupation, and particularly candidates that look like they have and do have upper-class occupations.

Importantly, the women-only data indicate that there exists a systematic electoral penalty, especially for female candidates who look like they have and do have working-class occupations (Panel 3). Women candidates that 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 woman 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-value < 0.001). To put these results in perspective, our findings are in line with [Berggren et al. (2017, p. 80)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?XdNQgq), who found that in Finnish municipal elections, “a beauty increase of one standard deviation attracts about 20% more votes.”

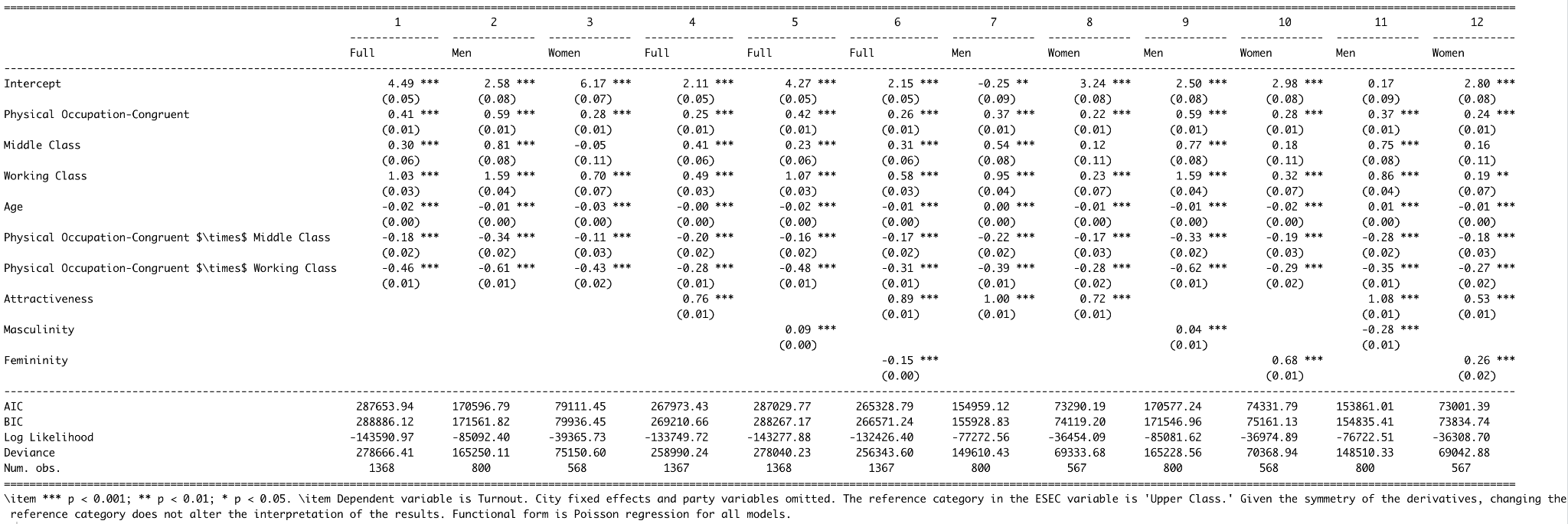
Interestingly, this working-class electoral penalty does not apply to men. A male political candidate who has and looks like he has a working-class occupation has a predicted count of 45 votes, versus 48 votes for a similar male candidate who does *not* look like he has a working-class job. Our analyses fail to find evidence that this change is meaningful at conventional levels of statistical significance.

Clearly, then, “looking working-class” substantively harms the electoral performance of political candidates, but more so for women candidates. While most research has previously noted the penalties that women are subject to when they perform a “man’s work” [(Heilman et al., 2004, p. 416)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?VhPiVO), in this paper, we find both a gender penalty and a class penalty. As argued before, Finland is characterized as an egalitarian society. Therefore, the Finnish case is a “hard case” for finding results that might indicate statistically significant correlations between turnout and physical appearance-based inequality. Yet, these empirical results come as uncomfortable evidence that Finns systematically avoid electing working class-looking female candidates. The authors are not aware of similar findings in the existing literature.

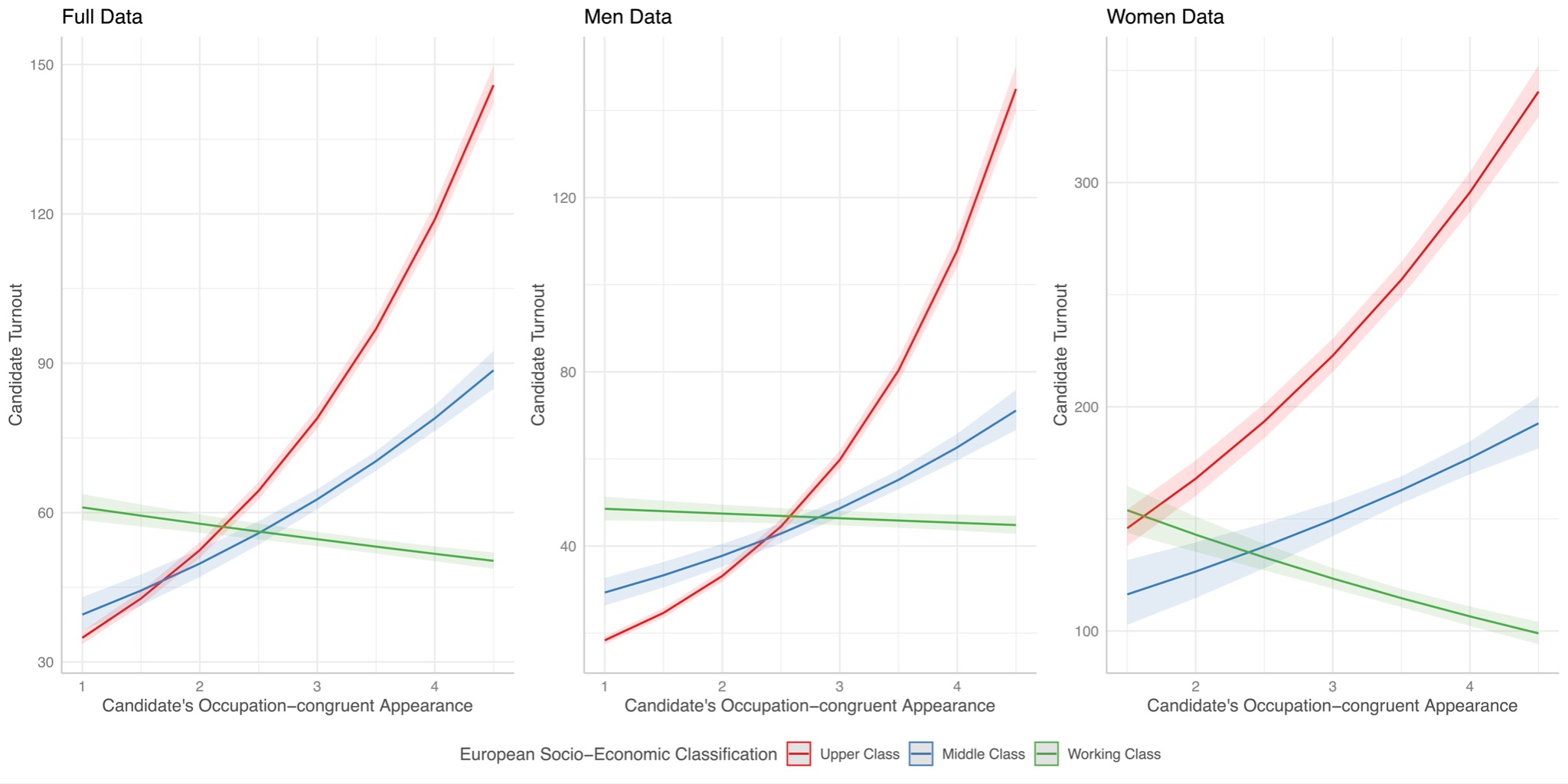
Since the literature has persistently found a strong correlation between attractiveness and turnout, additional estimations were performed, controlling for the perceived attractiveness levels of the candidate. In addition, because physical appearance-occupation congruence might be affected by the degree to which the candidate is perceived as more masculine/feminine, several models were estimated controlling for such covariates. Particularly, models 4, 6, 8, and 11 include the attractiveness covariate for the different datasets (i.e., full, men, and women), alone as well as in combination with perceived masculinity or femininity levels (i.e., models 5, 9, and 11, and 6, 10, and 12). The interactive hypothesis presented in this paper systematically keeps its substantive effect size and statistical significance across all specifications; thus, the relationship was unaffected, withstanding these robustness checks. Importantly, attractiveness still explains a considerable amount of variance in the dependent variable. Therefore, rather than providing alternative explanations for turnout, this paper presents a complementary story: not only does attractiveness predict turnout, as past research correctly argues, but the degree to which political candidates’ inferred occupations match their actual occupations matters too.

Moving forward, models 7 and 8 strongly suggest that attractiveness helps male candidates *more* than female candidates. This is in line with prior findings [(Ditonto & Mattes, 2018, p. 430)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?uBruzS). For example, [Kuwabara and Thébaud (2017, p. 1371)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?vNEI3n) explain that “women seeking business loans were even *less* likely to receive funding if they were attractive.” All in all, a recent systematic review of the working life-related outcomes of physical attractiveness (including in the political context) indicates that while the outcomes are mainly positive and, therefore, consistent for men, the outcomes for women appear more inconsistent as only attractive women can be both rewarded and penalized because of how they look [(Pajunen et al., 2021)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?EIqSMQ).

#### Table 2: Physical Appearance and Turnout in the 2017 Finnish Municipal Elections



#### Figure 3: Predicted Marginal Effects of the Combined Effects of Physical Appearance-Occupation Congruence and Social Class on Turnout



**Figure 1 Note**: The figure shows the predicted marginal effects of the combined effects of physical appearance-occupation congruence and social class on turnout. These predictions were obtained from the main model exploiting the full dataset, as well as the men-only and women-only datasets (in Table 2, model 1, 2, and 3, respectively). Substantively, the figure shows that Finnish citizens systematically vote for candidates with higher degrees of congruence between physical appearance and occupation, particularly candidates that look like they have and do have upper-class occupations. Furthermore, the analyses indicate that there exists a systematic electoral penalty, particularly for female candidates who look like they have and do have working-class occupations. In fact, women candidates that have working-class occupations but do not look like they do have a predicted count of 154 votes, whereas under the exact same circumstances, a similar woman who does look like she has a working-class occupation has a predicted count of 99 votes. This change is statistically significant (p-value < 0.001).

### Conclusion

The study of turnout has long recognized the importance of candidates' physical attractiveness. However, very little attention has been paid to other aspects of physical appearance. This paper provides evidence that such emphasis generates an incomplete understanding of the significance of physical appearance in voting and election research.

Previous studies argue that voters use heuristic shortcuts to make their voting decisions. Drawing from status characteristics and expectation-states theory, which are widely used in social stratification research, we argue that information about candidates’ occupations, combined with information about candidates’ physical appearance, functions as cues of status that have an effect on turnout in low-information elections. Specifically, we show that Finnish citizens systematically vote for candidates with higher degrees of congruence between physical appearance and occupation, particularly candidates that look like they have and do have upper-class occupations.

However, occupation as a status characteristic interacts with gender. We find that female candidates who have a working-class occupation and look like a representative of their working-class occupation are particularly penalized in elections. This result is in line with previous studies of physical attractiveness and labor market outcomes in social stratification research, which have shown that for women, the consequences of physical appearance can be much more comples and severe at the same time [(Frevert & Walker, 2014; Kuwabara & Thébaud, 2017; Pajunen et al., 2021)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?xqqIbl). In keeping with our empirical results, some previous research on turnout and physical attractiveness also indicates that attractiveness as a dimension of physical appearance matters more for female than for male candidates [(Ditonto & Mattes, 2018)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?qc75lJ). In sum, these results suggest that female candidates are more likely than male candidates to be elected/not be elected according to their physical appearance. Our findings also reveal that being male, as a status characteristic, compensates for the negative social 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 be considered an advantage [(see Berggren et al., 2017)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?2kriE4). All in all, our study demonstrates 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)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?jDbOls). At the same time, it seems that the physical appearance of working-class women in particular further lowers their chances of receiving a higher vote count and having their voices heard in municipal decision making.

Given that our study is, in many ways, explorative, more research on occupation-congruent appearance and its importance in turnout is needed. While our design allows for a general description of the existence of the phenomenon, the mechanisms by which physical appearance produces social inequalities in the field of voting 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 that looks like a representative of the same social class [(e.g., Evans, 2000)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?ylaxbm). Experimental designs will provide more insights into the possible mechanisms.

We also propose cross-context examinations for future research. These would include comparisons of different country contexts and electoral contexts (high versus low information elections). For example, in countries with higher income inequality and status competition, physical appearance might be even more decisive in electoral success than in more equal countries like Finland [(see Wilkinson & Pickett, 2020)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?qC6mGv). Taken together, our analyses suggest that physical appearance deserves more attention in future research.

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2. In this article we use the term “attractiveness.” However, it should be noted that in the stratification literature, it is often used interchangeably with “beauty.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The causal link between inequality and physical attractiveness is that because “good-looking people [...] achieve higher occupational success” [(Berggren et al., 2010, p. 8](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?CTAPcI); see also [Scholz & Sicinski, 2015)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?s7c1f6), they tend to be less egalitarian [(Price et al., 2011)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?OXZdfH). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Because of its autonomy, the Åland region did not hold elections at the same time as mainland Finland and was consequently excluded from the analyses. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Candidates that did not have a declared occupation by the time of the election (e.g., students, pensioners, unemployed) were discarded. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Although, in principle, all the photographs ought to be properly archived and publicly available, as all print material in Finland (Act on Cultural Resources in Finland [1433] 2007), gathering the photographs proved laborious. The photographs were processed in GIMP to remove any identifying information, including the candidate’s election number. Each candidate picture has a candidate number associated with it. These numbers were covered up with the logo of the research institution, that is, the logo of [anonymized]. Additionally, to test the usability of the images, a pilot study was conducted. Images of insufficient quality were removed from the sample. However, [Lenz & Lawson (2011, p. 575)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?zAfKH5) 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.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Femininity was defined as “womanly, effeminate” according to the official *Dictionary of Contemporary Finnish*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Since none of the subcategories are statistically significant between these groups, the figure strongly suggests that self-selection biases are not a concern in our study. They may be a concern if certain political parties are more likely to attract more beautiful individuals or if “politicians on the right look more beautiful” [(Berggren et al., 2010, 2017; see also, Price et al., 2011; Belmi & Neale, 2014; Olivola et al., 2018)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?52SUsK). This implies that attractive candidates might self-select into conservative parties (or vice versa), possibly threatening our identification strategy with endogeneity issues. Figure 2 indicates that there are no endogeneity issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. It should be noted that in correctly identified Poisson processes, the conditional mean of the outcome variable equals the conditional variance of the outcome variable [(Long, 1997, p. 218)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?ha7mTf). In our case, turnout shows some evidence of overdispersion. To relax the equidispersion assumption, both negative binomial and quasi-Poisson specifications were estimated [(Fox & Weisberg, 2011)](https://www.zotero.org/google-docs/?rRZHtj). The substantive results remain intact. These results are available upon request. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Party representation is as follows: KD (271), KESK (54), KOK (113), PIR (3), PS (508), RKP (141), SDP (141), SKP (1), VAS (103), VIHR (54). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)