

# The Psychology of Preference: Candidate Features, Heuristics, and the Determinants of Voting Decisions

## I. Introduction and Theoretical Synthesis: Reconciling Rationality with Reality

The study of electoral behavior fundamentally addresses two interconnected questions: why individuals choose to participate (turnout) and whom they choose to support (vote choice). Political science literature acknowledges the normative desirability of high participation rates and the empirical expectation that variation in turnout will yield electoral consequences.<sup>1</sup> However, establishing a clear, causal connection between turnout levels and electoral outcomes has proven difficult because the decision to turn out cannot be simply assumed to be exogenous to vote choice. At both the individual and aggregate levels, participation is likely

**endogenous to vote choice.**<sup>1</sup> If endogeneity exists, analyses attempting to infer a causal relationship between the level of turnout and the final vote share are potentially invalid due to biased coefficient estimates.<sup>1</sup>

### The Shift from Instrumental Rationality to Behavioral Models

Traditional models of voting behavior, such as the Calculus of Voting, assume that voters are instrumental actors motivated by a desire to shift the outcome of the election or express strong preferences.<sup>2</sup> These rational choice frameworks assume that voting behavior is an expression of pre-existing beliefs or preferences.<sup>2</sup> However, modern research, drawing heavily from social psychology and behavioral economics, has highlighted that causation can run in the opposite direction: actions themselves may drive preferences and beliefs. For instance, cognitive dissonance theory predicts that the simple act of voting for a candidate leads to a

more favorable opinion of that candidate in the future.<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary models recognize that voting is based not only on traditional policy positions (rational choice) but also on **non-policy information**, such as social identity and personality.<sup>5</sup> These candidate features are broadly classified as

*valence attributes*, which are characteristics universally desired by voters (e.g., competence, honesty) regardless of their ideological alignment.<sup>6</sup>

## The Dual-Process Model and Cognitive Shortcuts

Behavioral research confirms that citizens employ diverse strategies to reach their voting decisions, extending far beyond pure instrumental calculation. These strategies include Rational Choice, Confirmatory, Fast and Frugal, Heuristic-Based, and Going with Your Gut.<sup>7</sup> This framework aligns with the dual-process theory, which posits two primary systems for decision-making. System 1 processing, which is fast, intuitive, and largely automatic, leaves decision-makers susceptible to cognitive biases and

**heuristics.**<sup>8</sup>

Heuristics, which are cognitive shortcuts, allow for efficient decision-making by bypassing high cognitive and informational demands, particularly when time, information, or resources are limited.<sup>9</sup> While heuristics may allow poorly informed voters to reach decisions resembling those of their better-informed peers, they also carry the risk of leading to biases, errors, and suboptimal decisions.<sup>9</sup> The

**recognition heuristic**, for example, is identified as a crucial driver of choice in low-information voting contexts, allowing voters to draw inferences and form impressions based on limited data.<sup>9</sup>

The Heuristic-Systematic Model (HSM) suggests that vote choice is a two-stage process.<sup>11</sup> In the first stage, voters utilize broad-based heuristics, such as partisanship or rapidly perceived candidate features, to narrow the vast number of potential choice options down to a manageable subset. In the subsequent second stage, voters may engage in more systematic processing using detailed campaign issues to select the final alternative.<sup>11</sup> This model underscores why candidate features—the immediate, visible, and visceral inputs—are vital for the rapid, high-impact first stage of electoral decision-making.

## II. Candidate Features Driving Voter Turnout: Mobilization, Context, and Identity

Candidate features significantly affect turnout by influencing voter mobilization, affecting the perceived competitiveness of the race, and acting as identity signals that may trigger participation, both positively and negatively.

### The Role of Candidate Appeal in Electoral Context

Contextual factors, such as compulsory voting laws, the perceived importance of the election, and the size of the country, are established predictors of aggregate turnout rates.<sup>12</sup> Among non-institutional factors, the

**closeness of the election** is a critical determinant, grounded in the calculus of voting.<sup>14</sup> Research specifically on two-round presidential elections confirms that a smaller first-round margin between the frontrunner and runner-up is associated with a significant increase in turnout in the run-off.<sup>14</sup> However, the relationship is complex: the presence of a strong third-placed candidate can actually decrease turnout.<sup>14</sup>

The characteristics of the candidates serve to amplify the effect of electoral closeness. The rational choice model suggests that the likelihood of a vote being decisive ( ) drives participation. If a highly charismatic or ideologically compelling candidate feature increases the psychological benefit ( ) or duty ( ) a voter derives from participation, this feature acts as a multiplier. A compelling candidate feature, therefore, significantly boosts turnout, especially when the race is perceived as close. Conversely, an unappealing candidate (one with low ) may suppress turnout even if the race is competitive. This dynamic illustrates how candidate features are not just inputs to vote choice but are fundamental interacting variables in the decision to participate.

### Descriptive Features and Differential Mobilization

Candidate demographic features, including gender, race, and social class, serve as powerful symbolic markers that influence voter participation through mechanisms related to descriptive representation and group affinity. In the United States, women have consistently registered

and voted at higher rates than men in every presidential election since 1980, with this turnout gap slightly increasing over time.<sup>15</sup>

The concept of "descriptive elections"—where candidates vying for a seat differ in important demographic traits—suggests that such contests promote higher turnout.<sup>16</sup> The argument is that descriptive elections offer voters greater contrast and clearer options, which helps reduce voter alienation and indifference, thereby enhancing the legitimacy of the process.<sup>16</sup>

However, the mobilizing effect of descriptive features is nuanced and often dependent on context. While theories suggest that minority voters are mobilized by co-ethnic candidates, detailed analysis leveraging massive databases of individual registration records found that minority turnout was often **not higher in districts with minority candidates** after accounting for the relative size of the ethnic group within the district.<sup>17</sup> Instead, Black and Latino citizens were more likely to vote as their share of the population increased, regardless of the candidate's race.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, identity features can trigger antagonistic mobilization. Increased representation of minorities, particularly in historically white-dominant political contexts, can be perceived as a **threat**, resulting in the mobilization of white voters.<sup>18</sup> This complexity suggests that candidate identity features function as political polarizers. They drive turnout not simply through positive affinity for the represented group, but also through the negative mobilization of opposing groups. This results in changes to the overall composition of the electorate, a phenomenon recognized as a critical component of electoral change between consecutive elections.<sup>19</sup>

### III. The Behavioral Economics of Candidate Evaluation: Valence and Heuristics

When systematic information processing is taxing or unavailable, voters rely heavily on rapid, high-impact valence attributes, which are often inferred instantaneously from a candidate's appearance and nonverbal behavior.

#### The Primacy of Valence and Instantaneous Judgment

The traditional political science models recognize that voter choice is increasingly

candidate-centered and relies significantly on non-policy information.<sup>7</sup> The characteristics that define a candidate's appeal, often termed valence, generally fall into two main "super-categories":

**competence and trustworthiness/responsiveness.**<sup>6</sup> These super-categories encompass surrounding traits such as intelligence, knowledgeability, leadership, and caring.<sup>6</sup> Studies confirm that voters generally value competence in politicians, a preference that is particularly pronounced among people of higher social class.<sup>21</sup>

Crucially, voting decisions are often based on personality and character traits formed almost instantly through impressions.<sup>22</sup> These

**first impressions** utilize appearance and nonverbal cues as reliable sources of information, even affecting decisions on important public issues.<sup>23</sup>

## **Appearance, Facial Inferences, and Cognitive Shortcuts**

Facial appearance constitutes one of the most powerful and readily accessible inputs for System 1 processing in the electoral context.<sup>24</sup> Research demonstrates that rapid, unreflective inferences of competence, derived solely from a candidate's face, predict election outcomes significantly better than chance. For instance, competence judgments predicted the outcomes of US congressional elections (68.8% of Senate races in 2004) and were linearly related to the margin of victory.<sup>25</sup> These snap judgments, which are often formed within a 1-second exposure, accounted for 7.2% of the variance in vote share in experimental conditions.<sup>26</sup>

The advantage afforded by physical appearance is termed the **beauty premium**, whereby good-looking candidates win more votes globally.<sup>27</sup> Voters tend to associate beauty with competence, and empirical findings suggest that attractiveness may also serve as a heuristic cue for conservatism.<sup>27</sup> This reliance on superficial cues means that uninformed voters can be persuaded by good looks and potentially vote against their own interests.<sup>27</sup>

A fundamental finding highlighting the dominance of System 1 processing is that when participants were specifically asked to deliberate and make a good judgment, the predictive accuracy of the facial competence judgments was **dramatically reduced**.<sup>26</sup> This illustrates that appearance-based competence is an unreflective heuristic that primarily affects rapid, high-speed decision-making. Increased deliberation—the hallmark of System 2 processing—decouples the reliance on facial cues. This finding presents a strategic conundrum for campaigns: they must decide whether to emphasize policy and past

performance (to engage System 2 and reduce the superficial effect) or rely on the candidate's appearance advantage (to exploit System 1).<sup>28</sup>

## Nonverbal Behavior and Trait Mapping

Beyond static facial structure, dynamic nonverbal cues play a critical role in impression formation. Research shows that specific nonverbal behaviors, such as direct eye contact and smiling, are associated by voters with intelligence, good leadership, and caring.<sup>22</sup> However, no single nonverbal cue was found to reliably affect evaluations of morality or honesty.<sup>22</sup> This suggests that voters require more complex or verbal information to establish a candidate's integrity, unlike dominance (leadership) or affiliation (caring), which are judged instantaneously.

Furthermore, a candidate's nonverbal confidence has been found to be highly influential, affecting voters' perceptions of the candidate's **electability** (affective judgments like likability and friendliness) more strongly than their technical qualifications (cognitive evaluations like competence and knowledge).<sup>29</sup> This distinction was historically illustrated by the 1960 televised debate between Nixon and Kennedy: voters who listened on the radio generally felt Nixon won on policy, but those who watched the debate perceived Kennedy as the winner because he looked more confident and presidential.<sup>30</sup> Nonverbal behavior, therefore, strongly shapes the affective layer of a voter's impression, influencing whether they

*feel* comfortable supporting the candidate.

## IV. Psychological Congruence and the Role of Personality

The intersection of social psychology and political science demonstrates that voters utilize candidate personality profiles, often measured using the Big Five framework, as critical inputs for inferring ideology, predicting behavior, and establishing self-affinity.

### The Phenomenon of Personality Trait Matching

A central finding in voter evaluation is the tendency for individuals to prefer political candidates whom they perceive as having personality traits they value in themselves.<sup>20</sup> This mechanism, known as personality trait matching or congruence, involves comparing the voter's self-ratings on personality scales with their observer-ratings of the candidate.

Response surface analyses have revealed noteworthy effects of self-ratings and observer-ratings of Openness, Agreeableness, and Emotional Stability on the probability of voting for a candidate.<sup>23</sup> For Emotional Stability, the analysis provided the clearest indication of a

**congruence effect:** voting probability increased slightly at higher levels of congruence between self-ratings and observer-ratings.<sup>23</sup> However, this simple similarity effect does not apply uniformly. For Openness and Agreeableness, participants overwhelmingly based their judgments on first impressions (high observer-ratings) and preferred candidates they perceived as being highly agreeable or open,

**irrespective of their own self-ratings.**<sup>23</sup> This suggests that for many traits, voters are seeking a generally desirable quality rather than simple self-replication, reinforcing the dominance of first impressions.

## Personality as an Ideological Proxy

Candidate personality traits function as crucial mediating factors that connect a voter's fundamental psychological disposition to their political preferences, often acting as a non-policy shorthand for ideology.

There is a systematic connection between voter personality and partisan alignment. Voters characterized as extraverted and conscientious tend to possess Republican identification, while voters categorized as open to experience tend to possess Democratic identification.<sup>31</sup> The effect of these traits on vote choice is mediated by traditional determinants, such as party identification, policy preference, and affective feelings toward the candidate. Openness to experience exerts positive mediation effects, whereas extraversion and conscientiousness demonstrate negative mediation effects on voting decisions.<sup>31</sup>

This consistent relationship means that personality traits operate as proxies used in **statistical discrimination**.<sup>32</sup> Voters use a candidate's observable personality characteristics to infer hidden characteristics, such as ideology or partisanship, particularly in

low-information settings.<sup>32</sup>

Comparative research on electoral success globally reinforces this finding, suggesting that certain personality traits are inherently advantageous in politics. The analysis of expert ratings for candidates worldwide indicates that high levels of **conscientiousness, openness to experience, and psychopathy** are positively associated with better electoral results, while high extraversion is negatively associated.<sup>33</sup> These effects are context-dependent: high conscientiousness and narcissism are associated with better results, particularly for candidates on the right side of the ideological spectrum, thereby reinforcing the idea that specific personality profiles align with and signal underlying political positions.<sup>33</sup>

## Implicit Inferences and Resemblance Cues

The pursuit of similarity extends even to physical attributes. When partisanship is not explicitly known, voters may engage in selection based on **candidate facial resemblance**—selecting those who most resemble elected co-partisans.<sup>32</sup> This resemblance effect was found to be stronger for Republicans in the US, potentially because Republican legislators exhibit higher within-party facial similarity.<sup>32</sup> This behavior is interpreted as a form of statistical discrimination, where non-ideological attributes are used to infer political alignment and partisanship, most prominently in low-information environments.<sup>32</sup>

Beyond visual cues, voters also show a marked preference for candidates whose statements signal matching social-psychological attitudes, such as those concerning national identification, authoritarianism, and egalitarianism.<sup>34</sup> This alignment of deep-seated values further solidifies the role of candidate persona in acting as a stand-in for full ideological scrutiny.

## V. Strategic Implications: The Personalization of Politics and Microtargeting

The empirical evidence emphasizing the dominance of non-policy, psychological features in voter decision-making has spurred a pronounced increase in the personalization of politics and the strategic deployment of psychological profiles in campaigning.

## The Policy versus Persona Dichotomy

The increasing personalization of politics, especially in candidate-centered elections, means that the personality of candidates carries particular relevance.<sup>6</sup> Political outcomes are heavily influenced by how voters perceive the personality traits of the candidates.<sup>31</sup>

While the responsible party model hinges on the premise that voters endorse the policies of the party they support (policy congruence)<sup>35</sup>, non-policy attributes often diminish the importance of this alignment. Evidence suggests that parties for whom non-policy attributes play a significant role in voters' assessments are found to have

**lower overall policy congruence** with their supporters.<sup>35</sup> This misalignment occurs because non-policy factors, such as government performance, personality, or affective responses, often outweigh specific policy stands in the final voting calculation.<sup>35</sup>

## The Weaponization of Personality through Microtargeting

The documented influence of candidate personality traits on vote choice has direct strategic implications, leading to the development of sophisticated techniques like psychometric microtargeting.<sup>36</sup> This technological approach allows campaigners to analyze voters' psychological profiles and adapt political advertisements accordingly.<sup>36</sup>

Recent studies have shown that personalized political advertisements tailored to individuals' specific personalities are measurably **more effective than nonpersonalized ads.**<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, advancements in generative artificial intelligence (AI) and personality inference now allow for the automated generation and validation of these personalized ads on a mass scale.<sup>38</sup> This technology creates a scalable mechanism for crafting political messages that resonate deeply with individual personality traits and potential vulnerabilities, which researchers have termed a potential "manipulation machine".<sup>38</sup>

However, the efficacy of this technique must be interpreted with caution. While psychometric microtargeting successfully elicits a **more positive feeling** (affective response) toward the candidate when congruence is achieved, early experimental research did not find a statistically significant effect on the voter's actual *propensity to vote* for the candidate.<sup>37</sup> This suggests that personality congruence functions primarily as a persuasion accelerator, enhancing a voter's affective connection and receptivity to other messages (e.g., policy or attacks on the opposition), rather than operating as a direct and independent driver of

turnout or vote switching.

## VI. Synthesis of Candidate Features and Electoral Influence

The analysis across political science, behavioral economics, and social psychology confirms that candidate features are central components of electoral behavior, functioning largely through heuristic processing and identity matching. These features often dictate the filtering of information and the formation of affective ties, which precede and ultimately bias systematic policy evaluation.

### Causal Chain Model: Feature Perception to Vote Choice

The research establishes a systematic, multi-stage process through which candidate features influence the voting decision:

1. **Feature Exposure (System 1 Input):** Candidates' immediate features, such as facial appearance and nonverbal cues, are instantly and automatically processed.<sup>25</sup>
2. **Trait Inference (Heuristic Processing):** These raw inputs trigger rapid, unreflective judgments about core valence attributes, primarily competence, trustworthiness, and leadership.<sup>6</sup>
3. **Similarity/Congruence Check:** The inferred personality traits (e.g., Emotional Stability) and visual cues (e.g., facial resemblance) are unconsciously assessed against the voter's self-perception or in-group identity, confirming preference via perceived similarity or statistical discrimination.<sup>23</sup>
4. **Preference Formation/Filtering (Bias):** These heuristic judgments generate powerful affective responses (likability, trust) and create confirmation biases, influencing how subsequent, systematic policy or performance information is interpreted.<sup>40</sup>
5. **Electoral Outcome:** These pre-established preferences determine *vote choice* and, due to the endogeneity of participation, influence the magnitude and composition of overall *turnout* (mobilization).<sup>1</sup>

A summary of the key findings regarding candidate features is provided in Table 1, categorizing the features by their primary mechanisms and documented impact.

Table 1: Candidate Features, Mechanisms, and Electoral Outcomes

Candidate Feature Class	Specific Attributes	Dominant Processing Mechanism	Primary Electoral Impact	Supporting Evidence
<b>Visual/Nonverbal Cues</b>	Facial Competence, Attractiveness, Nonverbal Confidence (Eye Contact, Smiling)	System 1 (Rapid, Unreflective Judgments)	Strong prediction of Vote Choice (up to 7.2% variance); Drives perceived Electability more than Qualifications; Appearance cue for Ideology	25
<b>Inferred Personality Traits (Valence)</b>	Competence, Trustworthiness/Warmth, Leadership, Principled	System 1/System 2 (Heuristic Inference, Valence Judgments)	Fundamental determinants of choice (Super-Categories); High observer rating overrides self-congruence for some traits	6
<b>Personality Congruence</b>	Big Five (Openness, Emotional Stability), Facial Resemblance	System 2 (Statistical Discrimination, Self-Affinity)	Influences Vote Choice via trait matching; Mediates party identification; Drives preference in	23

			low-information settings	
<b>Demographics/Identity</b>	Race, Gender, Social Class	Descriptive Representation, In-Group Affinity, Threat Perception	Variable impact on Turnout/Mobilization; Gender gap favors women in turnout; Can induce negative mobilization of opposing groups	<sup>16</sup>

## The Electoral Function of Big Five Personality Traits

The Big Five personality model offers a robust framework for understanding how fundamental psychological dispositions translate into political support. Specific candidate and voter traits align systematically with partisan preferences and electoral outcomes, as detailed in Table 2.

Table 2: Key Personality Trait (Big Five) Correlates in Voter Behavior

Voter Personality Trait (Big Five)	Associated Party Identification (Observed Trends)	Observed Mediation Effect on Vote Choice	Electoral Success Correlation (Candidate Trait)
<b>Openness to Experience</b>	Democratic Identification <sup>31</sup>	Positive mediation via party ID, feelings, policy preference <sup>31</sup>	Positively associated with success; stronger for male candidates <sup>33</sup>
<b>Conscientiousness</b>	Republican Identification <sup>31</sup>	Negative mediation effect on voting	Positively associated with

		decisions <sup>31</sup>	success; stronger for candidates on the right <sup>33</sup>
<b>Extraversion</b>	Republican Identification <sup>31</sup>	Negative mediation effect on voting decisions <sup>31</sup>	Negatively associated with success (especially for incumbents) <sup>33</sup>
<b>Emotional Stability</b>	No strong partisan association found	Clearer Congruence Effect: High congruence increases voting probability <sup>23</sup>	No clear association found
<b>Agreeableness</b>	No strong partisan association found	Weak or no clear similarity effect; Strong effect of perceived agreeableness <sup>23</sup>	No clear association found

The data confirms that personality traits are central components of the political decision process, providing non-policy routes through which partisanship and ideology are expressed and confirmed.

## VII. Conclusion: Implications for Democratic Accountability

This comprehensive review demonstrates that candidate features—spanning visual appearance, nonverbal conduct, and inferred psychological traits—are profoundly influential determinants of the voting decision, often serving as powerful shortcuts in the absence of systematic policy information. The academic consensus points toward a highly personalized political landscape where System 1 processing frequently dictates early preference formation.

The implications for democratic accountability are substantial. When unreflective judgments of facial competence are highly predictive of electoral results, and voters rely on these superficial cues, they may choose candidates based on perceived competence or attractiveness rather than substantive qualifications, potentially leading them to vote against their own objective policy or material interests.<sup>27</sup> This is further reinforced by findings that

generalized, nonpartisan voter information campaigns often fail to significantly shape voter behavior, suggesting that psychological shortcuts remain dominant over attempts at purely informational intervention.<sup>43</sup>

The modern political campaign environment has capitalized on these findings, evidenced by the shift toward optimizing candidate persona and the rise of psychometric microtargeting.<sup>38</sup> The ability of AI to automatically generate personalized political advertisements tailored to personality profiles at scale represents a novel challenge to electoral integrity.<sup>38</sup> While personality congruence appears effective at increasing affective engagement, the ultimate conversion to vote choice requires further study. Nevertheless, the strategic focus is clear: candidate features are essential components used to establish affective ties, mediate policy preferences, and mobilize targeted segments of the electorate, thereby fundamentally shaping electoral outcomes in the modern era. This necessitates ongoing scrutiny from researchers and policymakers to ensure that the increasing personalization of politics does not undermine the foundational principles of informed democratic choice.

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