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Effects of Facial Maturity on Voting Preference

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of facial maturity on voting preferences. Participants (P=254) were randomly assigned to view one of three sets of faces in an online survey. Each participant viewed facial photographs of three male and three female members of the House of Representatives. Eyes and mouths were either unmodified, or increased or decreased by 15% to enhance the presence of neotonous or mature facial features. None of the participants were exposed to more than one version of each face. Participants identified which of two same-gender members most people would vote for in an election for the House of Representatives and rated each face on a number of personality characteristics. Expected results were confirmed in that mature faces were preferred over neotenous faces ($p < .001$). However, male participants tended to prefer more neotenous faces for female candidates ($p = .001$). These results suggest that physical appearance and facial maturity in particular, can influence the way people vote.

Facial Maturity and Voting

In voting for a city commissioner, Senate representative, or even a President, people often cast votes for candidates about whom they know little.  Given their lack of information on candidates' positions, what methods do people rely on in selecting a candidate?  Caprara and Zimbardo (2004) found that it is not necessarily political views that voters use in deciding on leaders of their country.  Instead, people vote for candidates whose personality traits match their own traits.  Thus, extroverted voters may vote for an extroverted candidate whose political views would likely not satisfy the voters' values.  A Mann Trend Test completed by Young and French (1998) showed a trend in increased height for ten US Presidents from 1948-1996.  This was consistent with previous research that they had done which claimed that "leaders" are often taller than "nonleaders." Although in the past two elections the shorter candidate (Bush) won, the evidence from Young and French (1998) suggests that voters are influenced by seemingly insignificant traits, such as height.  Are seemingly trivial characteristics capable of convincing voters that one political candidate is more qualified than another?

A major goal of political candidates is to create positive first impressions.  First impressions often provide a basis for opinions on a person's abilities or traits, despite whether these impressions are accurate. People often rely on physical attributes in forming initial impressions.  Three traits that have been well documented in how they initially influence people's opinions are attractiveness, facial maturity, and competence (Cunningham, 1990; Keating, 2002).

People who are viewed as attractive are more likely to be assumed to have positive personal characteristics as opposed to those labeled as unattractive (Dion,

Berscheid, & Walster, 1972).  According to Dion, Berscheid, and Walster, physically attractive people are not only viewed as more socially desirable, but they are also assumed to lead better lives.  People in political offices are able to benefit from any general positive "halo effect" of attractiveness.  One's physical appearance can have an influence on his or her success in politics, without the voters even being informed on his or her positions or qualifications.  It is possible that there are politicians making decisions that effect our entire country, which people know little about.  Are voters making informed decisions or simply voting for the person who *looks* the best for that position?  Consider the implications this can have on a country which is led by people who *look* best for the position.

Attractiveness may help candidates create a positive initial impression, but it may be more important that voters believe a candidate is competent.  According to Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, and Hall (2005), competence is said to be one of the most important trait attributes on which people evaluate politicians. If voters believe a candidate to be competent, then this initial belief could influence voting decisions. One physical characteristic that may be related to judgments of competence is facial maturity. Characteristics of a mature face are thin lips, more square-like jaws, thicker eyebrows, and eyes smaller in proportion to the rest of the face (Keating, 2002).  People with more mature faces are seen as being able to hold more control over social situations (Kim, Scheufele, & Shanahan, 2005).  Faces that appear to be more neotonous, having the facial features that look more like a baby's face, include characteristics such as proportionately larger eyes, a smaller chin, chubbier lips, and thinner eyebrows that are more arched (Keating, 2002).

Research on the role of mature and baby-faces in the political arena indicates that mature faces are preferred over immature faces. Baby-faces trigger the idea of submissiveness and helplessness (Keating, 2002); attributes seen in a child would not be favorable for a national political candidate. In a study done by Keating (2002), when alterations were made to John F. Kennedy's face that gave him more mature facial features, his ratings of dominance were boosted. In general, mature features signify power, dominance, and social competence (Cunningham, 1990). When it comes to people picking out characteristics desired in a political leader, power and dominance are much more likely to win over immaturity and helplessness.

Presumably, these effects are due to the impressions they create in the minds of voters. According to Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, and Hall (2005), the effect of first impressions in the political realm is evident and influential. In this study, participants were shown the faces of opposing candidates for three US congressional elections and indicated which candidate looked more competent. When participants were given unlimited time to study the opposing faces, 72% of the candidates judged as more competent were also the winners from the election. When participants were exposed to faces for one second and asked to choose the more competent face, their prediction matched the election winner 68% of the time. Todorov and colleagues concluded that "unreflective trait inferences" (p. 1623) do seem to contribute to voting preferences. Although many people prefer to assume voting choices are made from rational, well-thought out decisions, this study seems to suggest otherwise.

In a follow-up article to Todorov and colleague's work by Zebrowitz (a major researcher of effects of facial maturity) and Montepare (2005) in *Science* these two

researchers claimed that a more baby-faced individual is perceived as less competent than a more mature-faced. People do not like to believe that they can be influenced so easily, but past research shows that we do, in reality, "judge a book by its cover." Zebrowitz claimed that her past research shows that certain baby-faced individuals not only share similar facial features such as large eyes, small nose, high forehead, and small chin, but more influential people of this nature are seen as less competent-looking compared to mature-faced individuals (Zebrowitz and Montepare, 2005). Mature-faced individuals are favored as congressional leaders as well as other occupations requiring an intellectual leader (Zebrowitz and Montepare, 2005).

Because mature facial features are more prevalent in males than females and they are more associated with leadership characteristics, we see more male prominently in politics. Mature facial features are stereotypically more masculine and associated with dominance (Cunningham, 1990). One reason voters may be more likely to place a male in a high position is because of such characteristics and may deem a female candidate as unsuitable when she is just as, if not more, qualified (Sigelman, Sigelman, Thomas, & Ribich, 1986). The effects of maturity for female candidates are less clear. It is possible that mature-looking females will look better fit for a leadership role and thus would beat less-mature looking females.

Therefore, in order to observe the role that facial maturity plays in the political realm, it is hypothesized that mature faces will be rated as more electable when compared to baby faces. It seems that in society women are expected to be more mature, responsible, and less emotional to hold a political office. Therefore, a double standard expects women in leadership roles to appear less "baby-faced" than men in the same

roles.  Due to this potential double standard as well as the lack of abundance of female politicians, it is predicted that there will be a stronger effect for facial maturity for female faces.  However, it is also possible that people will prefer candidates who look more like their stereotype:  mature-looking males and immature-looking females.

In this study participants will be asked to decide who most people would vote for when given the task of deciding between two candidates a total of six times.  After all six decisions have been made; participants will be directed to rate each of the previous candidates on competence, trustworthiness, and attractiveness.
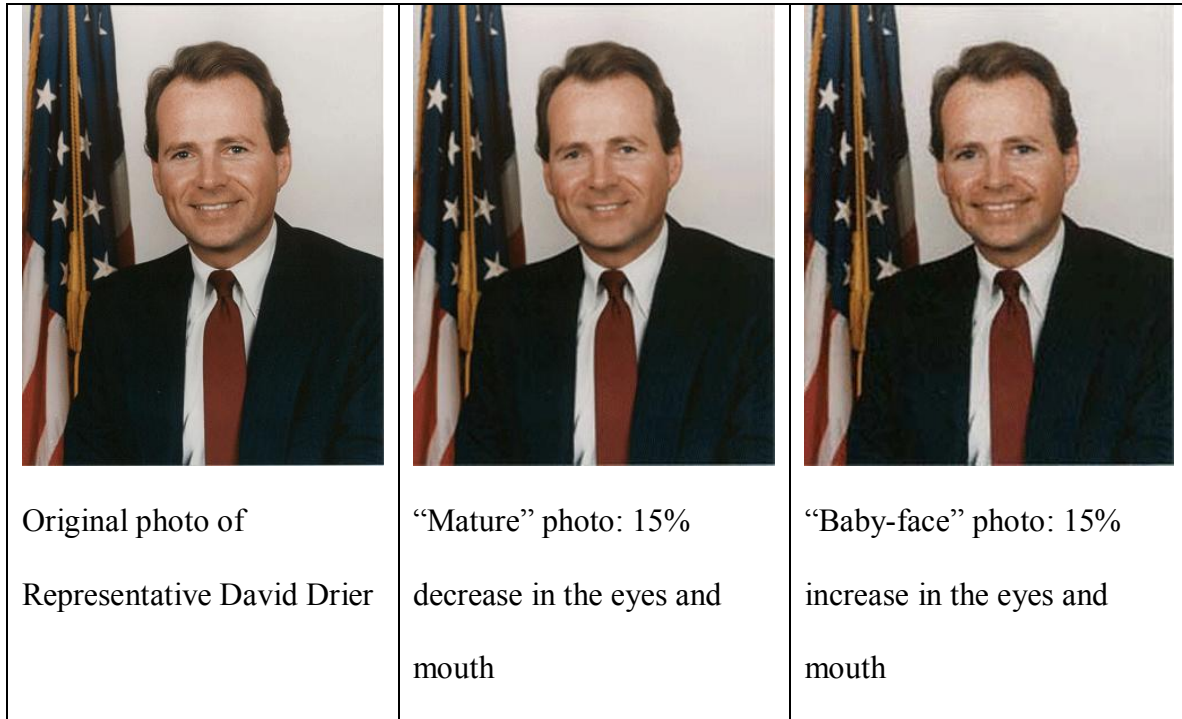
Method

*Participants*

336 participants originally filled out the survey, but 51 entries were removed due to the fact that they were incomplete, and 30 more were removed because participants were from the home states of the six representatives, to reduce the risk of participant bias. 254 final participants were used.  There were174 females (69%) and 80 males. Participants ranged in age from 11-57 years old with an average age of 23, and were 87% Caucasian and the remaining 13% were a wide mix of races, such as Black, Asian, Hispanic, Korean, Kenyan, Indian, Native American, Chilean, Yemen, etc.

Participants in this study completed the study online.  The study was advertised on a popular website of online psychology experiments.  The stimuli in this experiment were photographs of U.S. Representatives.  Six original photographs, three of male and three of female Representatives (see *Figure 1)* were retrieved from the US House of Representatives Official Website.[1]  From each of the original photographs, two more

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[1] US House of Representatives Official Website (http://www.house.gov/house/MemberWWW.shtml)

were created through minor modifications. All of the altered stimuli received either a 15% decrease or a 15% increase in their eyes and mouth.

*Figure 1.* Example of original, "mature," and "baby-face" versions of a stimulus face



| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Original photo of Representative David Drier | "Mature" photo: 15% decrease in the eyes and mouth | "Baby-face" photo: 15% increase in the eyes and mouth |

*Procedure*

Participants were first sent to an informed consent page to read over and click to accept before the study commenced. The three major sections that participants were asked to complete were six forced-choice comparisons between two same-sex candidates, then a ratings section where each previously seen face was rated on three different categories, and finally a rating of their leadership beliefs. Participants were first asked to fill out a brief demographics questionnaire that asked their age, sex, race, and home state. A between-subjects design was used for this experiment so no participant would see multiple versions of the same face. Each condition contained an equal number of male and female baby-face, original, and mature photographs.

The first main section, the Forced Choice segment, asked participants to make six two-face comparisons (always between faces of the same gender, see *Figure 2*) based on which candidate they thought most people would vote for.

In the second section, Ratings, participants were shown the same six faces and were asked to rate each face on the candidates' competence, trustworthiness, and attractiveness using 4-point Likert scales. Competence and trustworthiness were asked in order to measure participants' beliefs about the candidates' qualifications. Attractiveness was asked in order to test for a potential confounding variable. By asking participants to rate this characteristic, it was possible to test whether participants were voting on qualities of a candidate who seemed better qualified, instead of one who just looked more appealing to them.

The last section was a question that asked participants to decide what they valued more in a national leader: Compassion/Social Issues (Medicare, Assistance to the poor) or Strength (maintain country's status internationally). This question was designed to control for a possible individual difference in preference for babyish or mature faces (see Appendix A). We thought that compassion preference might lead to a preference for baby-faces and strength preference might lead to a preference for mature faces. At the completion of each condition, participants were then sent to a debriefing form and given contact information.

*Figure 2*:  Comparison between two faces



Candidate A          Vs          Candidate B

Appendix A

## Part 4: Follow-up Questions & Send Data Button

**What do you value more in a national leader?**

| Compassion/Social Issues (Medicare, Assistance to the poor) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Strength (maintain country's status internationally) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | |

Results

In this experiment, the researchers studied the relationship between political candidates' facial features (baby-face vs. mature) and voters' preference. Researchers hypothesized that candidates with more mature features would be thought to be more qualified for a political position by the voter. Additionally, researchers expected effects of maturity to differ for male and female faces.

*All Candidates*

Participants completed six forced-choice comparisons of pairs of same-sex candidates who always differed in manipulated facial maturity (baby-face vs. original, original vs. mature, baby-face vs. mature). A participant's preference for more mature faces was computed by summing the number of times the participant chose the more mature face of the pair of faces. This number varied from 0 to 6, where 0 indicated the participant chose all less-mature faces, 6 indicated the participant chose all more-mature faces, and 3 indicated an equal number of more-mature and less-mature faces were selected. Participants chose the more mature face 3.32 times out of the six opportunities during the forced choice. A one-sample *t*-test comparing 3.32 to the null hypothesis value of 3 showed these results as significantly different from 3, $t(253) = 3.99$, $p < .001$.

*Male vs. Female Faces*

The faces were then analyzed separately by sex of candidate. Each participant made three comparisons of male faces and three comparisons of female faces. Because there were only 3 comparisons for each gender, the range of possible more-mature faces was 0 to 3 rather than 0 to 6, where 0 indicated that all faces chosen were less mature, 3 indicated that all faces chosen were more mature, and 1.5 indicated that an equal number of more mature and less mature faces were chosen. Participants chose the more-mature male face 1.66 times of the three possible opportunities, which was significantly different from 1.5, $t(253) = 2.87$, $p = .004$. However, participants showed no significant preference for more-mature or less-mature female faces. On average, female faces were chosen 1.43 times, of the three possible opportunities for this sex. A one-sample t-test showed these results were not significantly different from 1.5, $t(253) = -1.33$, $p = .18$.

*Sex of Participant and Sex of Face*

The previous analysis of male and female faces was repeated after separating participants by gender. As before, the number of more mature faces chosen varied from 0 to 3, where 0 indicated that all faces chosen were less mature, 3 indicated that all faces chosen were more mature, and 1.5 represented the null hypothesis and test value for the significance tests reported below. The means are presented in Figure 1. Male participants preferred more mature male faces, $t(79) = 2.39$, $p = .019$, and less mature female faces, $t(79) = 3.375$, $p = .001$. Female participants showed no preference for female faces $t(173) = .503$, $p = .615$. The results for females having a preference towards more mature male faces was marginal, $t(173) = 1.88$, $p = .062$.

*Figure 1.* Number of more mature faces selected (out of three) by sex of participant and sex of candidate.
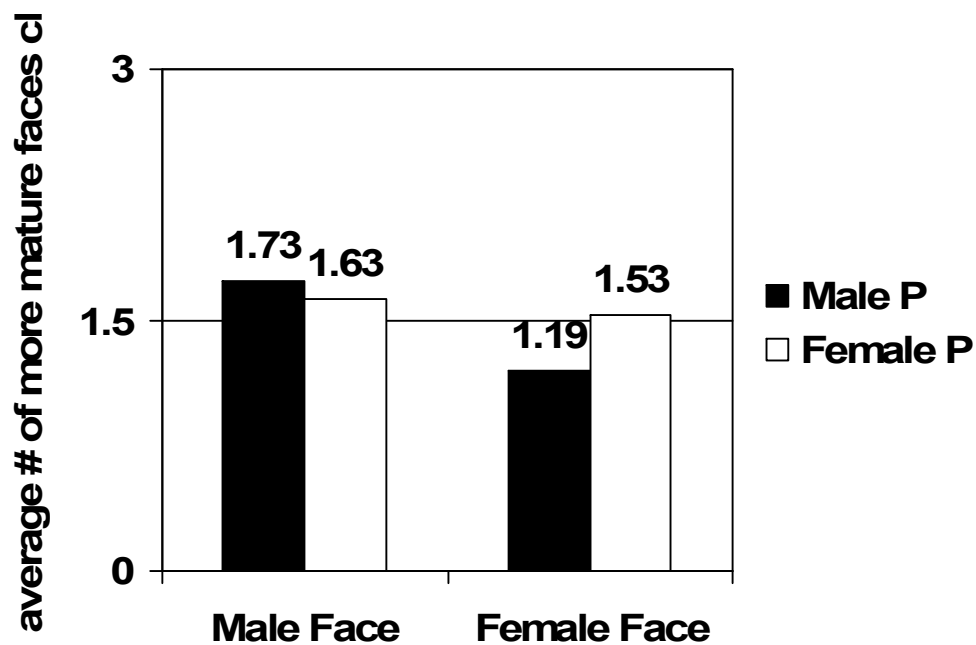
Discussion

Our hypothesis was that mature faces would be rated as more electable when compared to baby-faces. We wanted to observe what role facial maturity played in the political realm. Our hypothesis was supported in that our results showed that more mature faces were preferred over less mature faces. However, our hypothesis was not supported in finding a general trend that more mature women's faces were preferred for leadership roles.

The supported part of our hypothesis can be addressed through past theoretical findings. In past research we found that participants, when exposed to faces that were altered to have a more mature face, increased ratings of dominance among the political candidates (Keating, 2002). Our results were somewhat consistent with the previous findings. Overall, male and female participants (marginal significance with females) chose the more mature male candidates' faces in the forced-choice comparison. This set of results suggests that more mature male faces are viewed as more electable into the political arena.

However, one of the most interesting findings in this trend related to the preference of male candidates in their preference for female faces. Male candidates tended to view less mature female faces as more electable. These results were not consistent with what we had originally expected. Since women are in general new to the political arena, we hypothesized the maturity expectations for women would be higher than males.

In attempting to answer the question of why more baby-faced females were preferred by males for political offices we analyzed the results from the attractiveness

rating as well as follow-up question regarding preferred qualities of a leader (compassion vs. strength). Attractiveness was not a factor in influencing participants' candidate preference. Two out of the three baby-face females were rated as least attractive across all three versions of the face; the third baby-face was ranked 2$^{nd}$ most attractive out of three. Additionally, we analyzed the results for preferred qualities of a leader, in hopes that male participates preferred more compassionate leaders since more compassionate qualities have been linked to less mature faces (Cunningham, 1990). However, once again this was not the case, in that male participants preferred strength characteristics in their leaders rather than compassion characteristics. Male participants scored an average 3.45 on a 6-point Likert scale, with 1 being compassion characteristics and 6 being strength characteristics.

There can be practical applications of this finding in everyday routines. Our results suggest that female politicians would need to take into consideration their appearance depending on to whom they are campaigning. For example, political advertisements shown on ESPN, a television station generally viewed more by males, would want to portray themselves as more neotonous. Further research should analyze this conundrum in order to provide information to politicians regarding features that ensure success.

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