

# Want to Run for Political Office? Study Finds You Should Look the Part

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America saw the power of the eye-candy factor when JFK out-handsomed Richard Nixon in the first televised presidential debate. Fifty years later, a new study digs into exactly how much of an advantage it is for candidates to "look the part" and what kind of voter is most swayed by the facial region.

The study was conducted by two MIT political science professors and is out in the latest issue of the *American Journal of Political Science*. "As long as there has been democratic government, skeptics have worried that citizens would base their choices and their votes on superficial considerations," they write. "A series of recent studies seems to validate these fears."

**(LIST: 9 Contentious Campaign-Song Battles)**

The researchers recount studies that have shown people will infer "personality traits such as competence, intelligence, honesty, and trustworthiness from facial features alone" and that people rely more on such superficial impressions when they are less familiar with the subjects themselves. Such ideas led them to their main hypothesis: that people who know little about politics and watch a lot of TV (thus being exposed to candidates' faces), would be particularly affected by the candidates' looks. And that is precisely what they found.

They combined data about voters in the 2006 elections—including their vote choice, political knowledge and TV exposure—with data about the candidates' faces, specifically ratings people gave about how "competent" the candidates were based on looks alone. All told, they analyzed 35 gubernatorial races and 29 Senate races, and they found that "low-knowledge individuals" who watched above-average amounts of TV were about six times more likely to vote for the more competent-looking person than those who watched little TV. They were also much more susceptible than those who had "high-knowledge" of politics. (The *Onion* headline for this rather unsurprising find would likely read "Ignorant Couch Potatoes Less Likely To Make Thoughtful Decisions.")

But even among that most affected group, the effect wasn't insurmountable. The researchers say having the better face is comparable to getting newspaper endorsements, which usually sway about 5% of voters, or the advantage of being an incumbent. Still, they don't see this as a good sign of the times, deploring "that citizens judge politicians on superficial traits like appearance and that television's focus on image exacerbates this worrisome tendency."

**LIST: Top 10 Performing Politicians**

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