

Looks That Matter: The Effect of Physical Attractiveness in Low- and High-Information Elections

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Abstract

Research demonstrates that good looks matter in politics. The global trend today is toward more visual ballots, which include candidates' photographs. Because voters are exposed to a candidate's appearance right before they vote, physical attractiveness may be a significant contributor to electoral success. But does appearance matter equally in *high-information elections*, where all candidates are well known to voters, and *low-information elections*, where voters have little or no knowledge of who the candidates are? How does enhancing the photos of candidates through software programs affect their electability? To our knowledge, this article is the first to examine the impact of candidates' appearance in high- and low-information elections in the field using two experiments involving the manipulation of their appearance. Data for the first study were collected in a low-information election in which a student population was asked to select from a list of fictitious candidates for city council. In this study, we found that the candidates' looks had an impact on the votes they received. Data for the second study were collected right before a high-information election: A straw poll that took place immediately before the primaries for a major political party in Israel, involving party members selecting from a list of real candidates. Here the candidates' appearance had no impact on the votes they received, even for the lesser known candidates on the list. The results indicate that the impact of visual manipulation of candidate images does influence voters, but is limited by the informational context of the elections.

Keywords

low-information elections, heuristics, physical attractiveness, ballot design, primaries

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Introduction

Most citizens in democracies around the world vote either in national or local elections. These elections differ not just in their openness and fairness but also in the manner in which they are conducted. Voters may be asked to use a pen or pencil and fill out paper ballots, pull levers on voting machines, punch computer cards, or use electronic voting machines where they are required to cast their vote by pressing a button, touching a screen, or using a similar device (Fischer, 2001; Reynolds & Steenbergen, 2006). In any one of these methods, there is variation in the manner in which the choices are displayed. Some include only the name of the candidate or party, while others add additional information, such as the candidates' occupation or their pictures (Reynolds & Steenbergen, 2006).

Just as voting technologies take various forms, from paper to mechanical counters and computers, so does the information provided to voters as they cast their vote. Since ballots often include numerous candidates for various positions up and down the ballot, advocates argue that providing voters with candidate photographs may facilitate voting (B. Smith, Laskowski, & Lowry, 2009).

Images on ballots or touch screens help voters find their preferred choices, but they may also play an unintended role in shaping voters' preferences (Conroy-Krutz & Moehler, 2016). Studies of low-information elections, where voters have little or no information about the candidates on the ballot, have found that in ballots where images of candidates are present, better looking candidates perform better than those who are less attractive (Banducci, Karp, Thrasher, & Rallings, 2008; Buckley, Collins, & Reidy, 2007; Johns & Shephard, 2011).

Including images may extend the length of paper ballots, especially in elections where voters have to vote on numerous races and candidates, but this should change with the adoption of electronic voting. Electronic voting provides various advantages over manual voting. First, it offers the possibility of faster and more accurate results (Bederson, Lee, Sherman, Herrnson, & Niemi, 2003). Second, it is user friendly and can be modified to assist voters in the process, such as increasing the size of the font for the visually impaired and offering various language options in multilingual nations (Bederson et al., 2003). Finally, and more relevant to the topic of this article, electronic voting systems may increase the amount of available information, such as party symbols and candidate photographs, on which voters can base their decisions (Reynolds & Steenbergen, 2006). While the motivation behind this may derive from good intentions, namely, to assist voters in their decision making, we wonder whether posting candidates' images on the ballot will also discriminate against less physically attractive candidates?

Using a lab study and a large-scale national field experiment where photographs of fake and actual politicians were manipulated to look more or less attractive, we test the attractiveness effect in low- and high-information elections. Our results indicate that physical attractiveness does have a significant effect on electability in low-information elections, but no effect in high-information elections.

Cues Based on Candidate Appearance

Normative democratic theory expects voters to cast their vote based on informed choices. Reality begs to differ. Lacking in knowledge, voters often compensate using cognitive shortcuts, allowing them to make reasonable decisions without being completely informed (Banducci et al., 2008). Cues such as candidates' partisanship, home state, and standing in the polls can all serve as heuristics, especially in low-information elections where information is scarce (Popkin, 1991). Such cues, however, are imperfect and introduce bias into voting decisions. For example, studies have shown that male (E. R. Smith & Fox, 2001) and White candidates (Sigelman, Sigelman, Walkosz, & Nitz, 1995) fare better than their opponents.

Physical attractiveness presents another, potentially biasing, decisional heuristic. Research has established that physical attractiveness provides more attractive people with a significant social advantage. People associate physical attractiveness with positive attributes, such as trust and honesty, and favor attractive individuals in various situations, from mating to hiring, job earnings, and promotional opportunities—even length of jail sentences (Chaiken, 1979; Eagly, Ashmore, Makhijani, & Longo, 1991; Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994; Langlois et al., 1987; Zebrowitz, Hall, Murphy, & Rhodes, 2002).

Similar results have been documented in the realm of politics. Attractive politicians are seen as better and more effective legislators (Riggle, Miller, Shields, & Johnson, 1997; Rosenberg, Bohan, McCafferty, & Harris, 1986; Rosenberg, Kahn, & Tran, 1991) who obtain more media coverage (Tsfati, Elfassi, & Waismel-Manor, 2010; Waismel-Manor & Tsfati, 2011). In addition, their good looks provide attractive candidates with an electoral advantage, both in experimental studies and in real elections (Atkinson, Enos, & Hill, 2009; Banducci et al., 2008; Berggren, Jordahl, & Poutvaara, 2010; Brusattin, 2011; Lenz & Lawson, 2011; Rosar, Klein, & Beckers, 2008; Rosenberg & McCafferty, 1987; Surawski & Ossoff, 2006; Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, & Hall, 2005). While functioning as a heuristic, the "beauty premium," as it has been called, has real implications. If better looking candidates are able to raise more money, secure more endorsements, or even win elections at least in part due to their physical attractiveness, then these qualities are not merely variables we need to control for in electoral models; they may have a direct and substantive effect on candidates' electability (Ahler, Citrin, Dougal, & Lenz, 2015).

Whether anecdotally relying on the common wisdom from the 1960 televised Kennedy–Nixon debates or having read popular books on the subject (Etcoff, 1999; Hamermesh, 2011), candidates also understand that looks matter. Following consultants' advice, politicians go to great lengths to improve their appearance where possible. Examples include U.S. Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump's artificial tanning and French President Francois Hollande's €10,000 monthly haircut budget. However, hairstyle and even makeup can achieve only modest results (Brown, 1994; Newman, 2001; Reid, 2004; Schill, 2012), which is why some politicians resort to more drastic measures—consider New Jersey Governor Chris Christie's weight loss

lap-band surgery, Italy's President Silvio Berlusconi's hair transplant, and Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's numerous facial surgeries and Botox treatments (Lutz, 2010).

A cheaper, safer, and less intrusive way to improve a candidate's appearance in campaign communications may be through the use of image retouching software packages such as Photoshop or Portrait Professional (Hömberg & Karasek, 2008). These packages were used, for example, by former Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni to enhance her appearance in her 2009 electoral race against Benjamin Netanyahu (Keenan, 2008). In this article, we ask what the effect is of such manipulations on voters at the ballot box, namely: Can photo-enhancing software deliver a significant electoral advantage to the person whose image is altered?

The significance of candidates' appearance may become all the more significant when their photographs are visible and even salient right at the moment of voters' choice—that is, on the ballots themselves. According to Reynolds and Steenbergen (2006), about 30% of 107 countries studied use photographs on ballots. This practice is common in African countries, such as Guinea, Liberia, Angola, and Zimbabwe, many Latin American countries like Peru, Uruguay, and Venezuela, and exists in other countries, such as Cyprus, Greece, Haiti, Portugal, and Ireland. The inclusion of photographs in paper ballots in Singapore and India in 2015 suggests that this trend may be on the rise (TNN, 2015; Yong, 2015). As noted above, research suggests that the effect of candidates' images on ballots is quite significant. Thus, there is strong reason to believe that modifications of candidate photos on ballots should improve candidates' electoral prospects.

What can a voter infer from looking at a candidate's photograph for a few seconds or less? Research over the past two decades suggests voters may infer a variety of traits from candidate images, from competence and dominance to warmth and even health (e.g., Funk, 1999; Hall, Goren, Chaiken, & Todorov, 2009; Langlois et al., 2000; Little, Burriss, Jones, & Roberts, 2007; Olivola & Todorov, 2010; Todorov, 2008; White, Kenrick, & Neuberg, 2013). While these effects may be short-lived, they can still swing an election (Conroy-Krutz & Moehler, 2016).

High- and Low-Information Elections

From the race for the White House to the election of a county auditor, elections differ in salience and media coverage. High-information elections, such as parliamentary and presidential elections, receive extensive media coverage, while low-information elections receive little or none. This makes the task of informed voting more difficult in low-information elections because voters have little to almost no information to go on (Miller & Krosnick, 1998; Nichols & Strizek, 1995; Popkin, 1991). Hence, in low-information elections, when voters in the main lack information about the candidates, stereotypes and other judgments based on appearances assume added influence (Riggle et al., 1997; Riggle, Ottati, Wyer, Kuklinski, & Schwarz, 1992).

In low-information elections, characterized by minimal campaign ads and almost no media coverage, a candidate's image may take on such heuristic value that it may

sway electoral outcomes (Banducci et al., 2008). But in high-information elections, where candidates are well known and media coverage abounds, we would expect visual heuristics to play a much smaller role (Lenz & Lawson, 2011; Popkin, 1991). Given the above discussion, we first ask whether images play any role in low- and high-information elections. More specifically, in an era characterized by the widespread availability and growing use of image-retouching software, can image alterations shape candidates' electoral fate? Finally, we inquire as to whether such alterations have the same effect in high-information elections as in low-information elections.

Experimental Design

To determine the causal mechanism behind the effect of attractiveness, we conduct two tests—the first study was completed a few weeks before the primary election in a campus setting, a common experimental context in the social sciences, and the second in the natural setting of an actual primary election.

To examine the effect of physical appearance on electability in low-information environments, we used official photographs of U.S. congresspersons and senators in ballots presented to Israeli voters, who presumably were unfamiliar with these individuals. To be on the safe side, we excluded about a dozen politicians who may be familiar to some Israeli students, such as Hillary Clinton and John McCain, among others. To investigate the influence of physical appearance on electability in high-information environments, we used the photographs of real Israeli Likud Party candidates running in the Likud primary elections. To account for natural variation in familiarity, we introduced some variance among the Israeli candidates: half were well known (ministers and Knesset [parliament] members), while the others were somewhat less famous active party insiders seeking to be elected to the Knesset.

Using Portrait Professional, a popular photo-editing software package, we generated a more attractive version of each politician and a less attractive one. The software has over 70 sliders, ranging from 0 to 100, that can enhance or diminish certain features. We modified the photographs by sculpting the shape of the face (expanding or reducing the size of the jaw, forehead, and nose), smoothing skin imperfections, modifying the smile and whitening teeth, changing the lighting, contrast, and brightness (to increase or reduce shadows), and adjusting candidates' skin temperature (which projects warmth).

Due to the fact that real candidates would be criticized, if not ridiculed, if they were to submit an unrealistically attractive version of themselves to the party election commission, we made a genuine effort to make these changes as modest as possible but still significant. We modified eight candidates for the U.S. congresspersons low-information study and another eight for the Likud high-information study, ending up with 48 images (original, unattractive, and attractive across 16 candidates).

We pretested these images by asking student volunteers ($N = 63$ high information and $N = 60$ low information) at an Israeli research university to rate our candidates on a scale from *very unattractive* (1) to *very attractive* (10). Each respondent rated the eight different candidates who were presented to them in random order, to avoid order effects.

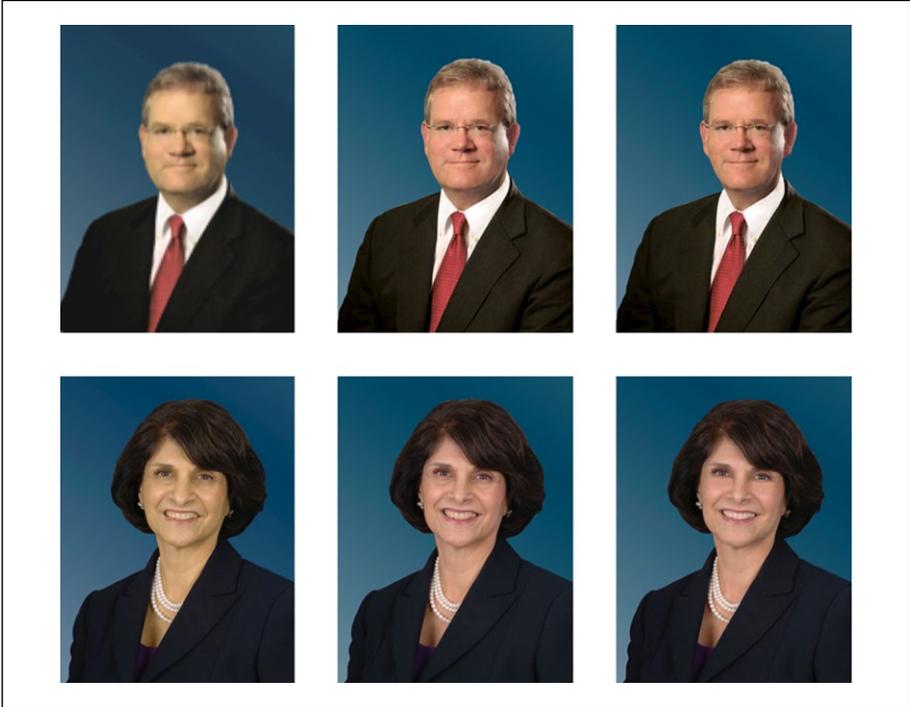


Figure 1. Unattractive, neutral, and attractive versions of the candidates, low-information election context.

We surrounded each candidate with eight control images (identical across conditions), providing our volunteers some comparative baseline and asked them to rate all. Of the original eight candidates we pretested in each study, we included only those four whose *t*-test scores indicated a significant difference between the original, unattractive, and attractive conditions.

Among the unknown American congresspersons who were included in Study 1, on a 10-point scale, the unattractive images were on average about 1.24 points less attractive than the original versions ($n = 20$; $p < .10$), while the attractive images were on average 1.41 points more attractive than the originals ($n = 20$; $p < .10$). Figure 1 presents two of the four candidates shown to study participants. In the center of Figure 1 are the candidates' original photos, on the left side are the unattractive versions, and on the right side are the more attractive versions.

As for the included Likud candidates in Study 2, the unattractive images were on average about 0.78 points less attractive than the original versions ($n = 31$; $p < .10$), while the attractive images were on average 0.46 points more attractive than the originals ($n = 31$; $p < .10$). Figure 2 presents two of the four candidates shown to study participants in the Likud context.



Figure 2. Unattractive, neutral, and attractive versions of the candidates, high-information election context.

Voting in the 2009 Likud primaries was conducted using touch screens throughout Israel. Hence, to address ecological validity concerns, we constructed touch screens to emulate the 2009 Likud electoral procedure and technological design. Touch screens were used both with the student population in Study 1, in the low-information condition, and with the general population in Study 2, in the high-information condition during the actual 2012 Likud primaries.

In the actual primaries, 59 candidates competed for the top 30 spots on the list, spots which polls predicted were high enough to get a seat in Parliament (the Likud ended winning 31 seats). Since our touch screen was too narrow to include all of the party candidates with their photographs, the list was divided into four stimulus screens featuring eight candidates each, totaling 32 photos altogether (see Figure 3). On each screen we asked voters to select four out of the eight candidates, giving each a 50% chance of being elected. There were six screens altogether. The stimulus screens were preceded by an instruction screen and followed by a final screen used to collect our control variables. Each of the stimulus screens featured one of the three versions of the treatment candidate surrounded by seven other control candidates (whose images were not varied). After making their selections from each screen, voters were asked to

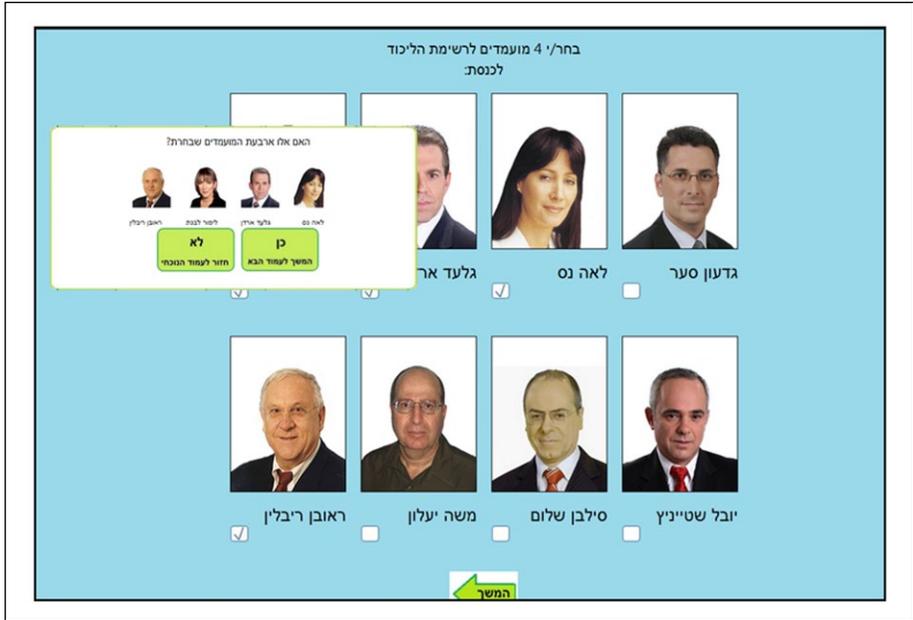


Figure 3. Touch screen design of electronic stimulus ballot.

approve their choices by clicking “yes” in a white box that opened on the left-hand side of the screen (see Figure 3). If they changed their minds, they could choose “no” and make another selection. This process reflects how the actual voting screens work in Israel.

Study 1: Low-Information Context

The first experiment was conducted in the spring of 2012 among eligible voters who consisted of students at two Israeli universities. Six voting booths containing touch screens were placed in a central location within each campus, and participants were recruited using an intercept technique from among those individuals passing by ($N = 467$; male = 54%; 72% Jewish, 14% Muslim, 16% other religion; median age = 25).

To test the effect of physical attractiveness in low-information elections where most voters are unlikely to be familiar with the candidates, we used the official portraits (headshots) of U.S. Congress members (half men, half women). These office holders would be unfamiliar to most Israelis. Each of these images featured the same angle, background, and size. To ensure lack of familiarity, well-known politicians such as John Boehner, John McCain, and Charles Schumer were excluded from the stimulus pool. To simulate a real election, participants were told that the candidates they were voting for were running for city council. Voters were asked to “choose four candidates to the municipal council” from each screen, or 16 out of the total pool of 32. At the

Table 1. Chi-Square Test of Independence for the Manipulated Photos in Low-Information Elections.

Candidate	Condition	Vote share (%)
Male 1	Negative	42
	Neutral	47
	Positive	46
		$\chi^2_{(2)} = 0.938$
Male 2	Negative	54
	Neutral	63
	Positive	70
		$\chi^2_{(2)} = 7.77^*$
Female 1	Negative	47
	Neutral	71
	Positive	73
		$\chi^2_{(2)} = 27.12^{**}$
Female 2	Negative	26
	Neutral	39
	Positive	47
		$\chi^2_{(2)} = 13.98^{**}$

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

completion of the voting process, participants were asked whether they were familiar with any of the candidates. Votes of those who responded yes—fewer than five students at each university where the balloting took place—were discarded.

Findings

To test the hypothesis that in low-information elections there is an association between candidate appearance and vote choice, we used a chi-square test of independence for the four unknown American candidates whose pictures we manipulated (see Table 1).

Table 1 shows that in three out of the four cases there was a significant relationship between candidate appearance and vote share received. Overall, the more attractive the candidate, the more votes received. Starting with the image of Male 2, when there was no manipulation, his share of votes was 63%. When the manipulation was positive, this proportion rose to 70%. When the manipulation was negative, however, his vote share dropped to 47%. Among female candidates, appearance was also related to votes received. Seventy-one percent of voters chose Female 1 when there was no manipulation of her photo. This proportion rose to 73% when the manipulation was positive and fell to 47% when it was negative. Similarly, 39% selected candidate Female 2 with no manipulation of her photo. A positive manipulation raised that number to 47%, while a negative manipulation caused it to dip to 26%. The positive and neutral conditions of Male 1 fared better than the negative version, but these differences were not significant.

Study 2: High-Information Context

To address concerns about the ecological validity of our research, we conducted a second study on location among real Likud primary voters prior to their entering the ballot room. This straw poll took place right before the actual vote. The Likud Party primary elections are the largest in Israel and serve as fertile ground for testing the effect of candidates' physical attractiveness, for various reasons. First, in these primaries, where more than 100,000 Likud members select the party's list, the ballot includes the candidates' names and their photographs. Second, we were granted permission by the Likud's supervising judge to place our own experimental ballots next to the real ones, ensuring that our experiment would not be an artificial construct, but an almost identical realistic electoral procedure. In fact, citizens voted in our straw poll just prior to casting their vote in the primary election, insuring no contamination from prior voting by replicating their vote.

Third, even if some voters are more politically informed than others, the character of this primary election is such that most voters should be not very familiar with many of the candidates running for office.¹ In other words, while most voters should have formed an impression of the major candidates, including assessments of their competence, background, skills, and appearance, they should have less knowledge about those sectorial candidates running for office at the subnational level as newcomers. Hence, if physical attractiveness plays a role at all in these elections, it should play a greater role for these lesser known candidates. To our knowledge, this is the only field study so far to test the use of software packages to retouch photos and embellish real candidates' appearances in a natural setting. The setting and design should allow us to examine the effect, if any, of such modifications.

There were four screens in this experiment (see Figure 3). On the first two, we placed well-known ministers, deputy ministers, and heads of parliamentary committees (Silvan Shalom, Moshe Yaalon, Gilad Erdan, Gideon Saar, Yuval Shteinitz, Rubi Rivlin, Limor Livnat, and Lea Ness). The second screen included salient Knesset members who were not ministers at the time (Zeev Elkin, Dani Dannon, Carmel Shama, Yariv Levin, Ophir Akunis, Zion Finnian, Gila Gamliel, and Miri Regev). The third and fourth screens included images of lesser known regional and sectorial candidates, none of which were national office holders at the time.

The experiment was conducted at four of the largest polling stations in the country (Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Haifa, and Lod) throughout Election Day (November 25, 2012), from 10:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Altogether, 501 registered voters took part. Demographically, our sample is representative of the Likud primary voting public. More than two thirds (71%) were male, and most (80%) were older than 30 years; one quarter (25%) of our participants were single and two thirds (64%) married. In terms of religion, the vast majority of the respondents (99%) were Jews. About a third (32%) described themselves as secular, over one third (38%) as traditional (those who observe only some of the religious rules, such as go to the synagogue occasionally, or observe Kosher dietary rules but drive on the Sabbath), and about a quarter (24%) as religious.

Table 2. Chi-Square Test of Independence for the Manipulated Photos of the Likud Primary Candidates.

Candidate	Condition	Vote share (%)
Well-known male	Negative	51
	Neutral	50
	Positive	52
		$\chi^2_{(2)} = 0.057$
Unfamiliar male	Negative	36
	Neutral	36
	Positive	30
		$\chi^2_{(2)} = 1.64$
Well-known female	Negative	45
	Neutral	44
	Positive	52
		$\chi^2_{(2)} = 2.68$
Unfamiliar female	Negative	18
	Neutral	21
	Positive	21
		$\chi^2_{(2)} = 0.459$

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Findings

Table 2 presents the results of Study 2. In contrast to the results from the first study, physical attractiveness had no evident effect on candidate electability in the context of the Likud primary election. Regardless of whether the candidates were among the better known contenders on the first two screens or the lesser known candidates on the last two screens, familiarity had no significant effect on vote choice.

Discussion

A growing number of elections around the world, from Ireland to Singapore and India, are witnessing a transition from paper ballots to electronic voting, of which a significant number are now incorporating candidate images as visual cues for voters when casting their ballots. The current study is perhaps the first field test to systematically examine the impact of candidate appearance in high- and low-information elections.

Survey studies have found that low-information decisions based on the candidates' physical attractiveness can influence election results (Banducci et al., 2008; Brusattin, 2011). Given that altering candidate images through Photoshop and other software packages has become a common practice among consultants, we investigated the effect of the manipulation of candidate appearance on the ballot itself in both an on-campus experiment and a field experiment with real voters. Our findings confirmed those of prior studies, which found that in low-information elections there is indeed a

significant association between candidate appearance and vote choice. Respondents were more likely to vote for candidates whose pictures had been manipulated to improve their appearance than when those images were made to look less attractive. However, when the study was conducted in a high-information election context, candidate attractiveness had no effect on vote share.

The results of Study 2 are particularly interesting because they emerged from a straw poll that took place immediately before the actual vote of real Likud primary voters. These were voters with a strong interest in politics who paid their party dues and took the trouble to leave their homes, stand in long lines, and vote, with only the candidates' names and photographs to guide them. Our results indicate that at least among these voters for whom primary elections are a salient event (less than 2.5% of eligible voters participate in Israeli primary elections), heuristics such as physical appearance played no role in their choices, even when it came to voting for the lesser known candidates on the list.

However, we must consider these results with caution. Voters in Study 2 had more than heuristics to rely on. Looks matter, but so does familiarity with the candidates' record and positions, even if this knowledge is limited. Moreover, since voters in Study 2 knew who the candidates were, we had to conduct subtler image manipulations than those we performed in Study 1, to avoid ridicule and maintain participant buy-in. We tried to make the image modifications undetectable by voters, and perhaps that is exactly what happened—they may have been too subtle for voters to recognize.

Future research should test this delicate balance. Is there a point at which the enhancement of photos no longer benefits the user? In recent years, the fashion industry has found this pivotal point. Public opinion against Photoshopping models' images boosted sales of companies who refused the practice, and in some cases has even brought about legislation against such image manipulations (Minsberg, 2012; Sheffield, 2015). We are still not certain, however, when such modifications will be detrimental to a candidate.

Moreover, we should further examine the effect of the visual manipulation of candidate images in low-information elections in more natural experimental conditions or straw polls. Studies could compare the results of straw polls with candidates whose pictures appear on screen with those for whose names only appear on the touch screens. Doing so would help determine whether the visual cues on the screen made the difference between winners and losers in a given election.

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Note

1. Likud Party members are required to vote for the national list and for candidates representing certain sectors of society, including young people, immigrants, women, non-Jewish minorities, and representatives of various geographical areas.

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