

Ballot, Ballot in the Box who's the Most Successful of Them All? the Effects of Physical Attractiveness on Vote Shares in the Irish European Parliament Elections

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Abstract

The effects of physical attractiveness on the electoral successes of political candidates has widely been investigated in previous studies on regional as well national elections. This study investigates effects of candidate appearances on vote shares during the European parliament elections in 2019. It is based on an observational case study on candidate characteristics for Irish candidates running the European parliament. The sample consists of candidates' personal characteristics, such as gender and party membership, as well as the perception of their warmth and competence. The empirical findings support a two-dimensional structure of perceived candidate characteristics centering around warmth and competence. They also indicate that ratings of physical attractiveness as well as displays of happiness affect evaluations of warmth and competence, and those perceptions in turn, particularly the perception of warmth, affect electoral outcomes.

Keywords

Candidate appearances, physical attractiveness, candidate evaluations, turnout, 2019 European parliament elections

Physical Attractiveness and Candidate Characteristics

Studies on candidate appearances continuously show positive effects of physical attractiveness on vote shares (e.g., Rosar et al. 2008; Rosar et al. 2012; Jäckle et al. 2020). While the focus of this research mostly lies on the national or even regional elections, recent studies show how candidate evaluations are crucial even in second-order elections such as EU elections (e.g., Gattermann & de Vreese 2017; Gattermann & Marquart 2020). Some studies suggest that the perception of physical attractiveness is linked to perceptions of other candidate characteristics such as competence (e.g., Stockemer & Praino 2015; Todorov et al. 2005). Furthermore, research shows expressions of happiness can positively affect vote shares of district candidates (e.g., Horiuchi et al. 2012). It is not far-fetched to assume that displays of happiness can have a positive impact on perceptions of attractiveness. Such a potential link and interdependence relationship is however underexplored in the study of candidate appearances. Much research on images and perceptions of candidates has recently been influenced by social psychological research on person perceptions (e.g., Gabriel & Masch 2017; Ferreira Da Silva & Costa 2019). This branch of research consistently finds two distinct dimensions of trait evaluations: warmth and competence. The stereotype content model proposes that most impressions about people are formed along these two dimensions (Cuddy et al. 2008; Fiske et. 2002; Fiske et al. 2007). Warmth as a dimension represents personal factors such as friendliness, trustworthiness, likeability and potentially even empathy for others. Competence as a dimension represents is more strongly tight to job performances and professional competence. Characteristics that are typically associated with competence include assertiveness, intelligence, and knowledge (e.g., Fiske et al. 2002).

A two-dimensional structure of person perceptions has also been supported by a large number of empirical studies in political science regarding candidate evaluations (Bittner 2011: 30). Although some studies propose a three-dimensional structure of candidate evaluations, a two-

dimensional structure is most common in candidate evaluations (Bittner 2011). In political science, these dimensions are sometimes called “personality and performance” (e.g., Gabriel & Vetter 1998) or “character and competence” (e.g., Bittner 2011) instead of warmth and competence. However, despite a change in labels, the content of both factors remains stable.

It has also been pointed out that voters’ expectations are high for political leaders on both factors – higher than for average people (Caprara & Vecchione 2013: 44). According to social role theory voters can expect political candidates to show high levels of leadership skills (assertiveness, dominance, decisiveness) as well as some personality traits that foster cooperation and cordial relations, e.g., with respect to international relations and agreements. Statesmanship certainly requires high levels of warmth as well as competence. Hence, candidates who show high degrees on both dimensions should be favored by voters.

This study investigates the relationship between physical attractiveness, emotional expressions as well as perceptions of warmth and competence. The assumption here is that perceptions of warmth and competence are affected by candidates’ physical attractiveness and emotional expressions. Moreover, are interested in the effects of happiness on electoral success. Based on the theoretical expectations the following three hypotheses are derived:

H₁: The more attractive candidates are, the higher their ratings of warmth and competence.

H₂: The happier candidates appear, the higher their ratings of warmth and competence.

H₃: The more warm and competent candidates appear, the higher their vote shares.

Methods and Data

This study focuses on the 2019 European parliament election in Ireland. The electoral system in Ireland is based on the Single Transferable Vote (STV), whereby voters rank their candidate preferences on the ballot. Ireland had three electoral districts, whereby candidates competed for one of eleven seats in the European parliament in the three constituencies: 19 candidates in

Dublin, 17 candidates in Midlands North West and 23 in South. The voting ballots display portrait pictures of all candidates running for office alongside their names, party memberships and professions. This visual display makes Irish voting ballots a suitable case study for testing the influence of candidate appearances. Candidate appearances can be used by voters as “information shortcuts” in order to make a decision (Lau & Redlawsk 2001). Having pictures on the voting ballot could potentially affect undecided voters in the very last moments before casting their votes.

Following the European parliament election in May 2019, all portrait pictures were collected. Any identifying information, such as party logos, pins, and religious symbols, were removed from the pictures. During August and September 2019 based on the pictures nine perceptions of each candidate were rated via the online platform clickworker. For the completion of the micro-task, raters were compensated with a monetary incentive of 1.25 €. Each rater only coded 20 pictures of candidates for one out of nine items. By doing so, raters were less likely to experience coding fatigue and moreover, the perception of each candidate characteristic is measured independently from other impressions.

The measurement of physical attractiveness is based on an “attractiveness consensus” (Rosar et al. 2008; Grammar et al. 2003; Henss 1992), whereby a small number of coders is already sufficient for providing a reliable measure of physical attractiveness. In this study, candidates’ physical attractiveness was measured by at least two dozen raters who rated the pictures between August and September 2019 via the online platform clickworker. The raters based in Germany were unlikely to know that politicians were portrayed during the rating task, since all identifying information was removed and European candidates are usually not widely known, even less so in other European countries.

Based on the research that has been done on the “attractiveness consensus”, the study assumed a similar consensus for the perception of other impressions. The study also included one item

for the following eight characteristics: dominance, assertiveness, honesty, happiness, intelligence, problem solving skills, likeability, and trustworthiness. All nine items concerning the perception of these candidate characteristics were measured in the same way. Using likeability as an example, raters were asked “how likable is this person”, followed by a scale ranging from “not at all likeable” (1) to “very likeable” (7). Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for each candidate characteristic.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Candidate Characteristics

	Min	Max	Mean (SD)
Physical Attractiveness	1.86	5.24	3.19 (.82)
Happiness	2.29	5.61	3.93 (.85)
Honesty	3.14	5.11	4.10 (.51)
Trustworthiness	2.81	5.51	4.10 (.65)
Likability	3.19	4.86	4.05 (.40)
Assertiveness	3.18	5.32	4.33 (.55)
Intelligence	3.10	5.20	4.11 (.55)
Problem-solving Skills	2.79	5.36	4.22 (.47)
Dominance	2.33	5.79	3.93 (.70)

Note: Table displays descriptive statistics of candidate characteristic (N = 59).

Additional candidate information was collected based on its availability. This includes the candidates’ party affiliations, their gender, their occupation and whether they had already obtained a seat in European parliament in a previous election, which was the case for seven candidates. These cases are labelled as “incumbent” (1) compared to other candidates (0). The dependent variable is each candidate’s share of first preference votes, ranging from 0.13 to 22.63 percent of vote shares.

Preliminary Results

The first step in this analysis is testing the dimensionality of the perceived candidate characteristics. According to the stereotype content model (Fiske et al. 2002), a solution with two factors is expected: warmth and competence. Warmth should consist of personal attributes that are relevant in social interactions, while competence should reflect a factor based on attributes that are relevant in performance tasks. The attributes of honesty, trustworthiness, and likability typically represent warmth, while assertiveness, intelligence, problem solving skills and social dominance represent competence (see Fiske et al. 2002). This two-dimensionality can be observed empirically in the data (see Table 1).

Table 2: Principal Component Analysis for Warmth and Competence

	Warmth	Competence
Honesty	.897	
Trustworthiness	.867	
Likability	.799	
Assertiveness		.868
Intelligence		.764
Problem solving Skills		.760
Dominance		.712
Percent of Explained Variance	42.3	33.5

Note: The solution is based on a principal component analysis with varimax rotation (N = 59).

Since this two-dimensional structure exists within the data, mean indices for warmth and competence are used in subsequent regression models (warmth: Cronbach's alpha = .84; competence: Cronbach's alpha = .77). The following regression models in Table 3 and Table 4 analyze the effects of physical attractiveness and displays of happiness on warmth and competence. As previously theorized the perception of warmth is positively affected by displays of happiness as well as candidates' physical attractiveness (see Table 3). The perception of

competence is only positively affected by physical attractiveness and not displays of happiness (see Table 4).

Table 3: Regression of Warmth on Happiness and Attractiveness

	Warmth
Happiness	.217*** (.056)
Attractiveness	.205** (.064)
Incumbent	.094 (.140)
Female	.109 (.101)
Constant	2.52*** (.246)
Observations	59

Note: Table displays unstandardized regression coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses. †p < 0.1; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

Table 4: Regression of Competence on Happiness and Attractiveness

	Competence
Happiness	-.039 (.067)
Attractiveness	.284*** (.077)
Incumbent	.085 (.167)
Female	-.356 (.121)
Constant	3.53*** (.295)
Observations	59

Note: Table displays unstandardized regression coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses. †p < 0.1; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

Finally, vote shares are predicted in Table 5 by considering perceptions of warmth and competence. , warmth has a positive effect on vote shares that remains statistically significant on the ten percent level when controlling for gender and incumbency (see Table 4).

Table 5: Regression of First Preference on Warmth and Competence

	First preference
Warmth	2.66 [†] (1.53)
Competence	.245 (1.45)
Incumbent	9.09*** (1.96)
Female	-.532 (1.41)
Constant	-7.64 (7.87)
Observations	59

Note: Table displays unstandardized regression coefficients. Standard errors in parentheses. [†]p < 0.1; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001.

Discussion

The findings support the two-dimensional structure of warmth and competence in the perception of candidate characteristics. Physical attractiveness positively affects not only the perceptions of warmth but also the perception of competence, thereby supporting H₁. Happiness has a positive impact on the perception of warmth; however, it does not affect perceptions of competence. Although H₂ is only partially supported, it is no surprise that happiness has a stronger effect on perceptions of warmth compared to competence. Competence could also be negatively affected by strong displays of happiness. In this study, the perception of warmth positively affects vote shares, whereas the perception of competence is not linked to higher vote shares. Again, only partially supporting H₃ and showing a slightly stronger connection between physical attractiveness, happiness, perceptions of warmth and vote shares compared to competence. However, this does not imply that perceptions of competence do not affect vote shares. A range of studies has shown that perceptions of competence can predict election outcomes (Todorov et al. 2005) and that perceptions of dominance are crucial for voters'

support (e.g., Petersen & Laustsen 2020). In this study the sample size might have simply been too small in order to detect an effect for perceptions of competence on electoral outcomes.

Further studies are needed in order to investigate the relationship between physical attractiveness, emotional expressions and perceptions of warmth and competence (e.g., structural equation modeling). Future research should consider further election that include pictures on voting ballots since these countries provide best-case scenarios for finding direct effects on election outcomes.

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