
Republicans Prefer Republican-Looking Leaders: Political Facial Stereotypes Predict Candidate Electoral Success Among Right-Leaning Voters

Social Psychological and
Personality Science
3(5) 605-613
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sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1948550611432770
<http://spps.sagepub.com>


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Abstract

Previous research suggests that voting in elections is influenced by appearance-based personality inferences (e.g., whether a political candidate has a competent-looking face). However, since voters cannot objectively evaluate politicians' personality traits, it remains to be seen whether appearance-based inferences about a characteristic continue to influence voting when clear information about that characteristic is available. The authors examine the impact of appearance-based inferences for a characteristic that is well known about candidates: their political affiliation. Across two studies, the authors show that U.S. candidates facing conservative electorates benefit from looking more stereotypically Republican than their rivals (controlling for gender, ethnicity, and age). In contrast, no relationship between political facial stereotypes and voting is found for liberal electorates (using identical controls). The authors further show that this contrast between liberal and conservative electorates has more to do with individual-level differences between liberal and conservative voters than with macro-level differences between liberal and conservative states.

Keywords

voting, political choice, person perception, first impressions, stereotyping

An important privilege enjoyed by most members of democratic societies is the power to elect their political leaders. With this power, however, comes considerable responsibility on the part of the electorate, as the merits of Democracy are fundamentally limited by the quality of voters' decisions. A properly functioning democratic system requires that its citizens make careful and well-informed choices about the political candidates they select to steer local, national, and international policies.

Unfortunately, a growing body of research suggests that many voters rely on superficial nonverbal cues to elect their leaders (Lawson, Lenz, Baker, & Myers, 2010; Olivola & Todorov, 2010a). For instance, studies have found that political candidates benefit (in terms of electoral success) from having facial features that make them appear more competent, sociable, or dominant than their opponents (Antonakis & Dalgas, 2009; Ballew & Todorov, 2007; Lawson et al., 2010; Lenz & Lawson, 2011; Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, & Hall, 2005; for reviews of this literature see Hall, Goren, Chaiken, & Todorov, 2009; Olivola & Todorov, 2010a). This suggests that voters draw inferences about candidates' personality traits from their faces, and that these inferences, in turn, can influence votes.

However, the relationship between appearance-based trait inferences and voting has mainly been shown for personality characteristics, which voters cannot objectively evaluate in candidates. Relying on appearances to draw inferences about a characteristic might be rationalizable, to some extent, in the absence of objective cues. It is therefore important to determine whether voters would continue to rely on candidate appearances when unambiguous information about a target characteristic is readily available. That is, do appearance-based inferences about a characteristic influence voters if they possess clear and objective information about that characteristic? Here, we examine the predictive impact of

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appearance-based inferences for a characteristic that is well known about candidates: their political affiliation.

Political party affiliation is a particularly important variable that candidates' faces may convey to some extent (Bull & Hawkes, 1982; Bull, Jenkins, & Stevens, 1983; Jahoda, 1954; Olivola & Todorov, 2010b; Rule & Ambady, 2010; Samocho-wiec, Wänke, & Fiedler, 2010). And, as party affiliation strongly predicts a politician's stance on many issues, voters rely heavily on this cue when selecting candidates (Bartels, 2000; Rahn, 1993). This is especially true in the United States where two parties (Democrats and Republicans) dominate politics. Given the importance of (actual) party affiliation in shaping election results, and building on previous evidence that appearance-based personality inferences are correlated with voting, we hypothesized that voters might be influenced by the extent to which political candidates have stereotypically conservative or liberal facial features.¹ Even if voters do not directly judge party affiliation from appearances, they might nonetheless draw inferences about political orientation more broadly. Preliminary support for this general hypothesis comes from Samocho-wiec et al. (2010), who close their article with an intriguing result showing that Swiss parliamentary candidates benefit from having facial features that stereotypically fit their political choices, prompting the authors to conclude that "looking like what you are seems to be an asset in politics" (p. 211).

While face-party congruency might boost vote-shares in some cases, one can imagine situations where the opposite could be true. For example, liberal candidates running in conservative regions might benefit from having stereotypically conservative facial features that voters may perceive as indicative of right-leaning views. Since the ability to accurately infer party affiliation from faces is far from perfect (Olivola & Todorov, 2010b) there is ample room for liberal politicians to look deceptively conservative (and vice versa).

This article examines the relationship between stereotypically Republican (vs. Democratic) facial features and electoral success, for U.S. political candidates facing conservative versus liberal electorates. We looked at the 1995–2006 gubernatorial and 2000–2008 Senate elections. For each election, we obtained judgments concerning which of the two rival candidates (Republican or Democrat) looked more like a Republican based on their facial photos. We then compared these inferences with candidates' vote-shares, first in the actual elections (Study 1), and second in a voting experiment where participants were only shown photos of these politicians and had to select their preferred candidate in each election (Study 2). Our dependent variable in both studies was the share of votes going to Democratic candidates (ignoring third-party votes in the actual elections). We arbitrarily chose Democrats as our focus of analysis, however facial judgments and vote-shares are perfectly inversely correlated for rival candidates² (i.e., results are identical if we instead focus on Republicans) since we ignored third-party candidates. We predicted that candidates running in right-leaning states or facing conservative voters would benefit from looking more Republican than their opponents, while the opposite would be true for left-leaning electorates.

Study 1: Predicting Voting in Actual Elections

Method

Participants

Sixty Princeton University undergraduate students participated for payment (65% female; age range = 17–23 years). Nine participants were excluded from our analyses: eight had spent fewer than 2 years living in the United States and/or were not U.S. citizens (and thus may not have shared the same political facial stereotypes as American voters); one was not engaged in the task.

Election Data and Political Facial Stimuli

We looked at the 1995–2006 gubernatorial elections and 2000–2008 Senate elections in the United States. For every election, we recorded each candidate's vote-share (ignoring third-party votes), ethnicity, gender, date of birth (when available), and incumbency status during that election. Candidate age at election time was estimated by subtracting birth-year from election-year. We also recorded the year and state in which each election occurred. Elections lacking Republican or Democratic candidates, or involving highly recognizable candidates (e.g., Barack Obama), were excluded from our studies. Black-and-White headshots of Democratic and Republican candidates from these elections were obtained, standardized in size, and placed on gray backgrounds (see Ballew & Todorov, 2007; Todorov et al., 2005 for details on the procedures involved in obtaining, selecting, and standardizing photos). An election was omitted from our studies if either candidate's photo was of low quality or a candidate was not facing the camera. Any conspicuous background (e.g., the Capitol or a U.S. flag) was removed (and replaced with gray background, as described above). Our final stimulus set consisted of 256 pairs of rival candidate photos, representing 115 gubernatorial and 141 Senate elections. Of these elections (ignoring third-party candidates), two thirds (66% or $n = 170$) were between Caucasian males, only a quarter (26% or $n = 66$) involved at least one female candidate, and a small minority (10% or $n = 26$) involved a non-Caucasian candidate.

Procedure

To obtain measures of political facial stereotypes, we had participants guess, for each election, which of the two rival candidates was the Republican (or Democrat). The experiment, which lasted approximately 30 min, occurred entirely through computer interface and consisted of 256 trials—one for each election in our sample. A series of instruction screens introduced participants to the study, explaining what they would see and need to do. Participants were informed that they would not be shown third-party candidates (i.e., that only Republican and Democratic candidates would be presented). The computer then presented participants with all photo-pairs (randomly ordered for each participant) of political facial stimuli. Each trial represented one election and showed the two rival

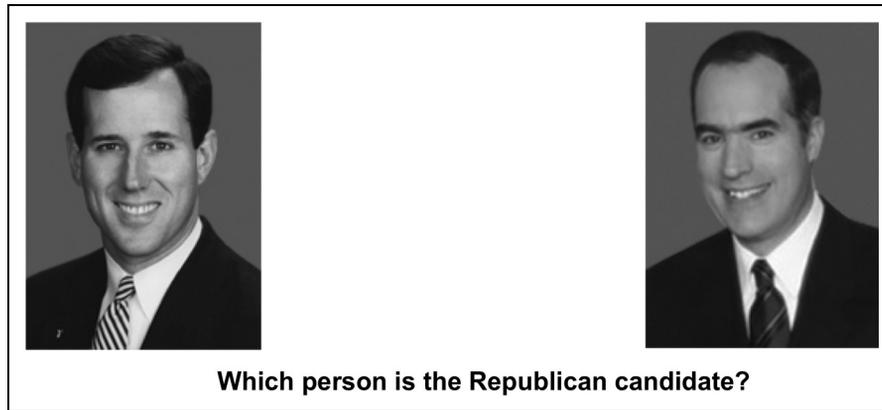


Figure 1. Example screen shot from an experimental trial showing rival candidates from one election. Participants responded by clicking directly on the photo of the person they guessed to be the Republican or Democratic candidate (in this example, the participant is asked to identify the Republican candidates). They were subsequently asked to indicate which (if any) of the candidates they recognized.

candidates (Figure 1). The computer randomly determined which politician appeared on the left versus right half of the screen. No other information about the candidates was provided. Participants were assigned (between-subjects, in alternating order) to identify either the Republican or the Democrat in each pair, solely from their headshots. They did this by clicking on the corresponding politician's photo. Participants also indicated, on each trial, whether they recognized one or both candidates (using buttons labeled "Recognize?" and located next to each photo). No feedback was provided after each trial. However, to motivate serious performance, participants were informed that they would discover their accuracy at the end of the experiment. A final screen revealed their overall performance (% correct guesses), after which they were thanked for their participation and paid.

Analyses

We discarded trials in which either candidate was reportedly recognized (2% of elections, on average) and then calculated, for each election, the proportion of participants who misidentified the Democrat as Republican (interjudge agreement: Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$). As explained above, our dependent variable was the share of votes going to Democratic candidates in the actual elections (ignoring third-party votes).

We compared political facial stereotypes (the proportion of participants who misidentified a Democratic candidate as being Republican) with the results of the actual gubernatorial and Senate elections in each U.S. state across several years. Before doing so, we divided the elections according to the dominant political orientations of their electorates. Specifically, for each state and election year, we determined whether the Republican or Democratic *presidential* candidate had received more votes in that state during the closest occurring presidential election. For Senate and gubernatorial elections that fell right between two presidential elections (i.e., those occurring in 1998, 2002, and 2006), we used the average of both presidential

vote-shares. A state's electorate (on a given election year) was considered conservative (right-leaning) if the Republican presidential candidate had received more votes ($n = 146$ elections), and liberal (left-leaning) otherwise ($n = 110$ elections).

Results

Judgments of political party affiliation were heavily driven by candidate gender and ethnicity. Participants generally guessed that female candidates were Democrats; in elections involving a female candidate running against a male rival ($n = 59$), female candidates were identified as Republicans by only 35% of participants, on average. Similarly, participants usually guessed that non-Caucasian candidates were Democrats; in elections involving an ethnic minority candidate running against a Caucasian rival ($n = 26$), the former was identified as Republican by only 20% of participants, on average. In order to control for these confounds, our analyses consider not just all elections, but also the (majority) subset involving rival Caucasian male candidates for which gender and ethnicity cannot influence the results.

In line with previous studies (Jahoda, 1954; Olivola & Todorov, 2010b; Rule & Ambady, 2010; Samochowiec et al., 2010), we also found that participants were able to identify Republican candidates with above-chance accuracy (Range = 47–67%, $M = 56%$, $SD = 4%$), 95% confidence interval [CI; 55%, 57%]. Accuracy levels were significantly lower, though still above chance, when we only considered elections between Caucasian males (Range = 41–61%, $M = 52%$, $SD = 4%$), 95% CI [51%, 53%]. The fact that the highest accuracy level achieved was only 67% shows that many Democrats look more stereotypically Republican than their rivals, and vice versa.

For elections between Caucasian males, we find that in conservative states, Democratic candidates' vote-shares were positively predicted by their likelihoods of being misidentified as Republican (Figure 2—top-right quadrant). In other words, candidates running in right-leaning states benefited from looking more stereotypically Republican than their rivals. In contrast, there was no relationship between political facial stereotypes and

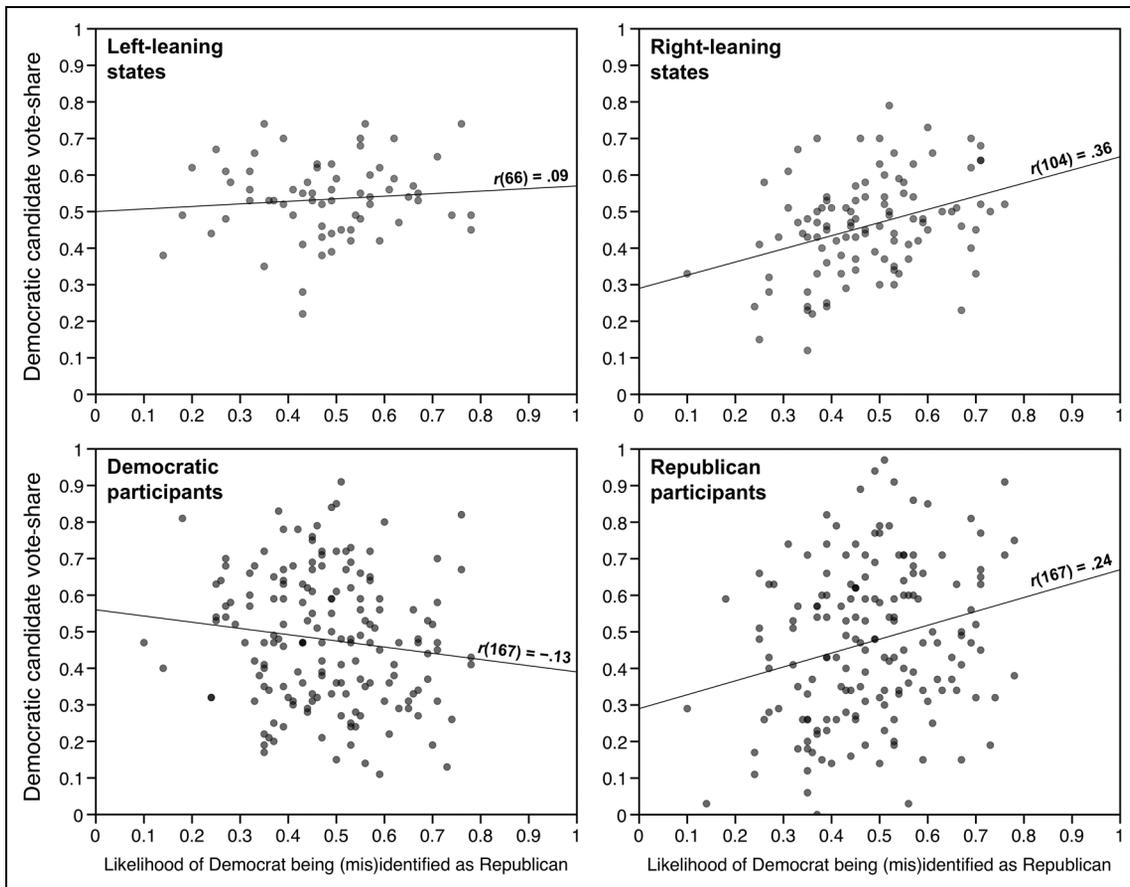


Figure 2. Democratic candidates' vote-shares plotted against their likelihoods of being misidentified as Republican, for elections between Caucasian male candidates. Points represent specific gubernatorial or Senate elections and lines represent best linear fits. Standard parametric correlations between the two variables (r) and their associated sample sizes (in parentheses) are also presented. Top-left quadrant: vote-shares from gubernatorial and Senate elections in liberal (left-leaning) states (Study 1). Top-right quadrant: vote-shares from gubernatorial and Senate elections in conservative (right-leaning) states (Study 1). Bottom-left quadrant: vote-shares from Democratic participant-voters (i.e., political affiliation = "Democrat") in the voting experiment (Study 2). Bottom-right quadrant: vote-shares from Republican participant-voters (i.e., political affiliation = "Republican") in the voting experiment (Study 2).

electoral success in liberal states (Figure 2—top-left quadrant). As a more rigorous test, we regressed vote-shares on the likelihood of being misidentified as Republican (statistical tests of normality showed that both variables approximated normal distributions), while simultaneously adding two dummy variables for Democrat and Republican incumbency status. Table 1 presents the regression coefficients for the likelihood of being misidentified as Republican (i.e., its ability to predict actual election vote-shares). As this table shows, looking Republican was uncorrelated with vote-shares in liberal states, but positively predicted vote-shares in conservative states. Furthermore, Table 1 shows that results were similar whether we considered all elections (i.e., including those with ethnic minority and/or female candidates) or only those between Caucasian males, as well as when age differences between rival candidates were also entered into the regression. Note that controlling for age differences consumes an additional degree of freedom *and* reduces our election sample size (age was unavailable for several candidates), thereby limiting statistical power. This explains why, even though the regression coefficient and its standard error remain unchanged

when we add the age-difference control, the p value increases to just above the standard threshold of significance ($p = .051$). Thus, neither gender, nor ethnicity, nor age can fully explain the relationship between political facial stereotypes and candidate electoral success in conservative states.

Discussion

These results support our predictions concerning right-leaning states, where more Republican-looking candidates received larger vote-shares. However, we found no relationship between political facial stereotypes and vote-shares obtained in left-leaning states—a (lack of) result that we had not predicted. This unexpected difference between liberal and conservative electorates raises a couple of important questions. First, we might wonder whether this difference is real (i.e., replicable). Perhaps, the relationship we found in right-leaning states is not reliable (a Type I error). Alternatively, it might be that we failed to detect an existing relationship between political facial stereotypes and voting in liberal states (a Type II error). We

Table 1. Results of Regression Analyses for Real Elections (Study 1)

	<i>n</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i> value
Left-leaning states					
All elections	110	.07	.05	1.39	.169
Caucasian male rivals only	66	-.01	.07	-.12	.908
Caucasian male rivals only + age-difference control	59	-.02	.08	-.26	.795
Right-leaning states					
All elections	146	.11	.05	2.29	.023
Caucasian male rivals only	104	.17	.08	2.24	.028
Caucasian male rivals only + age-difference control	91	.17	.08	1.98	.051

Note. Sample sizes and regression statistics (coefficient, standard error, *t* statistic, and *p* value) in predictions of Democrat election vote-shares (in the 1995–2006 gubernatorial elections and the 2000–2008 Senate elections) from the likelihoods of Democrats being misidentified as Republicans. All regression models included a pair of dummy variable controls for Democrat incumbency status and Republican incumbency status. The bottom-most regression models for left- and right-leaning states also included an additional control for the age-difference between rival candidates.

address this issue in Study 2 by examining whether political facial stereotypes can predict the voting preferences of participants in a controlled experiment; in particular, we wanted to see whether the specific pattern of results obtained in Study 1 would replicate. If this difference is real, then a second question concerns its origin. Specifically, we want to distinguish between two possible explanations: First, this contrast between liberal and conservative electorates might be due to macro-level differences between liberal and conservative states. Left-leaning and right-leaning states generally differ on a wide range of geographic, demographic, and economic dimensions; one or more of these factors could affect the extent to which voters rely on political facial stereotypes, regardless of their political leaning. Alternatively, individual-level differences between left-leaning and right-leaning voters might drive the liberal-conservative contrast in political facial stereotype reliance, with these micro-level characteristics reflected at the state level during elections. We address this question in Study 2 by examining how well political facial stereotypes predict the voting preferences of left- versus right-leaning participants, as well as those of participants from liberal versus conservative states. In this way, we can tease apart the potential impact of macro-level versus micro-level factors.

Study 2 compares political facial stereotypes (obtained in Study 1) with the results of a voting experiment in which participants were shown photos of the political candidates in each election, and asked to indicate the candidate they would (hypothetically) vote for.

Study 2: Predicting Voting in a Controlled Experiment

Method

Participants

We recruited 209 respondents (59% female; Age: Range = 18–67 years, Mean = 33.10, *SD* = 11.79, Median = 29) through Amazon.com’s Mechanical Turk website (www.mturk.com), who participated for payment. We discarded data from

participants who either had the same IP address as a previous respondent, were not U.S. citizens, had spent 5 years or less living in the United States, or who reported having previously completed the study. We also discarded data from a handful of participants who either completed the study in less than 10 min or failed one of two catch questions (by providing a birth year that was inconsistent with their reported age and/or by reporting that they had previously had a fatal heart attack). Altogether, we discarded 17 participants, so our final sample consisted of 192 respondents.

Stimuli and Procedure

We used the same political facial stimuli and a procedure very similar to Study 1. The main difference was that, instead of guessing political affiliation, participants were asked to indicate which of the two rival candidates they would vote for on each trial (based solely on candidate photos). Also, the study was conducted via the Internet, not in the laboratory, and participants did not receive feedback at the end of the experiment regarding their judgments. Finally, at the end of the experiment, participants were asked a series of questions about their political affiliation and the state/states they grew up and reside in (see below). All other aspects of the experiment were identical to those of Study 1.

Analyses

We divided our “participant-voters” according to their reported political affiliation. Specifically, participants were asked to report which of six categories—“Democrat,” “Republican,” “Independent (Democrat-leaning),” “Independent (Republican-leaning),” “Independent (no leaning),” or “Other/None”—best described their political affiliation and/or identity. We also divided participant-voters based on their preferences concerning the last two presidential elections (2004 and 2008). Participants who reported preferring the Republican candidate in both elections were categorized as having a Republican voting tendency, while those who consistently preferred the Democratic candidates were categorized as having a Democratic voting tendency. Finally, we divided

Table 2. Results of Regression Analyses for Voting Experiment (Study 2)

Participant-Voter Population	All Elections (<i>n</i> = 253)	Caucasian Male Rivals Only (<i>n</i> = 167)	Caucasian Male Rivals Only + Age-Difference Control (<i>n</i> = 149)
Political affiliation = "Democrat" (<i>n</i> = 60)	-.40***	-.21*	-.06
Political affiliation = "Republican" (<i>n</i> = 35)	.33***	.31*	.48***
Voting tendency = Democrat (<i>n</i> = 89)	-.38***	-.20*	-.05
Voting tendency = Republican (<i>n</i> = 44)	.24***	.21	.39**
Resides in left-leaning state (<i>n</i> = 89)	-.20***	-.10	.05
Resides in right-leaning state (<i>n</i> = 45)	-.17**	-.02	.19
Grew up in left-leaning state (<i>n</i> = 99)	-.19**	-.10	.05
Grew up in right-leaning state (<i>n</i> = 45)	-.24***	-.07	.14
Political affiliation = "Democrat" OR "Independent (Democrat-leaning)"			
+ Resides in left-leaning state (<i>n</i> = 50)	-.33***	-.18	-.05
+ Resides in right-leaning state (<i>n</i> = 21)	-.51***	-.16	-.01
+ Grew up in left-leaning state (<i>n</i> = 54)	-.34***	-.19	-.04
+ Grew up in right-leaning state (<i>n</i> = 24)	-.53***	-.22*	-.05
Political affiliation = "Republican" OR "Independent (Republican-leaning)"			
+ Resides in left-leaning state (<i>n</i> = 22)	.21**	.13	.31*
+ Resides in right-leaning state (<i>n</i> = 15)	.36***	.31*	.56***
+ Grew up in left-leaning state (<i>n</i> = 28)	.24***	.12	.32*
+ Grew up in right-leaning state (<i>n</i> = 11)	.30***	.30*	.54***

Note. Sample sizes and regression coefficients in predictions of Democrat election vote-shares (in the voting experiment; Study 2) from the likelihoods of Democrats being misidentified as Republicans. All regression models included a pair of dummy variable controls for Democrat incumbency status and Republican incumbency status. Regression models in the right-most column also included an additional control for the age-difference between rival candidates.

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

participant-voters according to the U.S. states that they reported currently residing in (at the time of the study), as well as the states in which they reported having spent most of their childhood. A U.S. state was considered to be right-leaning (*n* = 22) if its electorate had consistently preferred (i.e., voted for) the Republican presidential candidate (over the Democratic candidate) in all three of the last U.S. presidential elections (i.e., 2000, 2004, and 2008). Similarly, a state was considered to be left-leaning (*n* = 19) if its electorate had consistently preferred the Democratic presidential candidate (over the Republican candidate) in all three of these presidential elections.

We discarded trials in which either candidate was reportedly recognized (5% of elections, on average) and then calculated, for each election, the proportion of participants (of a given political category and/or from a given type of U.S. state) who preferred voting for the Democrat. Thus, the dependent variable in Study 2 was the share of participants (from a specific category) who voted for the Democratic candidates (based solely on candidate photos).

Results

For elections between Caucasian males, we find that the likelihood of being misidentified as Republican negatively predicted Democratic candidate vote-shares among participant-voters who were Democrats (Figure 2—bottom-left quadrant) and positively predicted Democratic candidate vote-shares among participant-voters who were Republicans (Figure 2—bottom-right quadrant). As a more rigorous test, we regressed experimental vote-shares on the likelihood of being misidentified as Republican, while simultaneously adding two dummy

variables for Democrat and Republican incumbency status. Table 2 presents the regression coefficients for the likelihood of being misidentified as Republican (i.e., its ability to predict participants' votes in Study 2). These results reveal several important features of the relationship between political facial appearance and the voting preferences of our different populations. When we consider all elections and fail to control for candidate age differences, we find that having a more Republican-looking face (than one's rival) negatively predicted the vote-shares of Democratic participant-voters and positively predicted those of Republican participant-voters. However, when we limit ourselves to elections between Caucasian male rivals and control for candidate age differences, this relationship disappears for Democratic voters but grows stronger (i.e., more positive) for the Republican voters, effectively replicating the pattern of results found in real elections (Study 1). Thus, contrary to right-leaning voters, the preferences of our left-leaning participant-voters seemed to be influenced by candidate gender, ethnicity, and/or age, but not by political facial stereotypes. This pattern holds whether we categorize participant-voters according to their political affiliation (Democrat vs. Republican) or their voting preferences in the last two presidential elections. In contrast to political affiliation or voting tendencies, the type of states that participants grew up or reside in did not impact the relationship between candidate appearances and vote-shares (note that the majority of our participants were Democrats, which explains why, in the first column of Table 2, we find significant negative relationships between appearing Republican and vote-shares in rows 5-8). In fact, when we divide participants according to both their political leanings and the states they grew up or reside in,

and after controlling for candidate age, ethnicity, and gender, we find that the relationship between candidate appearance (looking Republican) and vote-shares was close to zero for left-leaning participant-voters and significantly positive for right-leaning participant-voters, regardless of state type (though it is worth noting that growing up or residing in a right-leaning state further strengthened the appearance-voting relationship among right-leaning participant-voters).

Discussion

Study 2 replicated the pattern of results obtained in Study 1, thereby strengthening our confidence in the (initially unexpected) contrast between right-leaning electorates (who favor Republican-looking candidates) and left-leaning electorates (who show no significant political facial bias, once candidate gender, ethnicity, and age are controlled for). Study 2 further showed that this contrast has more to do with individual-level differences between liberal and conservative voters than with macro-level differences between liberal and conservative states.

General Discussion

In summary, we find that U.S. political candidates running in right-leaning states (Study 1) or facing conservative voters (Study 2) seem to benefit from possessing facial features that make them look more stereotypically Republican than their rivals (above-and-beyond their gender, ethnicity, and age). These political facial stereotypes were shown to predict the outcomes of both real elections (Study 1) and the voting preferences of participants in a controlled experiment (Study 2). Furthermore, Study 2 showed that conservative voters are more influenced by political facial stereotypes than are liberal voters, regardless of whether they grew up or reside in a left-leaning or right-leaning state. This suggests that the political advantage (in terms of vote-shares received) enjoyed by Republican-looking candidates running in right-leaning states has more to do with the individual-level characteristics of conservative voters than with the general political atmosphere, or any other macro features, that characterize these states. As a cautionary note, we should stress that macro-level variance in Study 2 was established by categorizing participants at the state level, rather than at a finer geographical level, such as by district. However, people are more likely to move or commute across districts than across states, so a district-level analysis would likely add noise and limit the number of participants that we could confidently categorize as being mainly exposed to a (relatively) conservative versus liberal political environment.

A few points about these results are worth discussing. First, one might question the direction of causality between facial appearance and electoral success. Perhaps winning candidates alter their appearances following election victories to appeal to their constituents. However, this is doubtful for several reasons. In many cases, the candidate photos we showed participants predated the elections themselves; yet, their

impressions based on these pre-election photos still predicted vote-shares. Furthermore, Lenz and Lawson (2011) recently showed that the relationship between facial appearances and voting is moderated by political knowledge and television exposure, such that candidate facial appearance predicts vote-shares most strongly among voters low in political knowledge and high in television exposure. The moderating roles of these two variables strongly suggest that the causal direction is from appearances to voting rather than the reverse.

Second, one may wonder whether political facial stereotypes are related to other appearance-based trait inferences. Using existing data drawn from previous studies (see Ballew & Todorov, 2007; Olivola & Todorov, 2010a; Todorov et al., 2005), we examined this possibility for facial competence. Competence is considered one of the most important and relevant attributes for a politician (Hall et al., 2009; Olivola & Todorov, 2010a), and often predicts election outcomes better than other traits inferred from faces (Hall et al., 2009; Olivola & Todorov, 2010a). We found that controlling for facial competence does not alter the predictive power of appearing Republican (vs. Democratic). Specifically, consider the regression coefficients presented in Table 1; moving down the column, their values are $b = \{.07, -.01, -.02, .11, .17, .17\}$ without the facial competence control and $b' = \{.07, .02, .03, .11, .16, .15\}$ after adding a control for facial competence. In other words, the coefficients for the likelihood that a Democrat is mistaken for a Republican are very similar whether or not we also include facial competence as a predictor. Thus, facial competence does not account for our results. Similarly, appearance-based judgments of attractiveness, honesty, and dependability (previously collected for a subset of elections, see Olivola & Todorov, 2010a; Todorov et al., 2005) did not correlate significantly with the likelihood of being identified as Republican: $r(57) = -.12, .14, \text{ and } .11$, respectively (all p values $>.29$). Still, political facial stereotypes may be related to other face-based trait inferences (which right-leaning voters are particularly sensitive to).

Third, one may wonder whether the facial characteristics that make someone look Republican or Democratic are permanent features (e.g., bone structure) or transitory features (e.g., facial expression, gaze direction, head tilt). The fact that judgments provided by experimental participants based on single headshots of each candidate predicted the preferences of real voters exposed to many samples of these candidates' appearances (through campaign ads, televised debates, newspaper articles, etc.) suggests that transitory features may be less important here. Because real voters (in Study 1) were exposed to different sets of images than our participants, permanent features were more common to what both groups saw. This suggests that political facial stereotypes are driven, at least to some extent, by permanent facial features. However, exactly which facial configurations make someone appear stereotypically Republican versus Democratic is still an unanswered question. Whatever these configurations, they seem to be more visible or significant to right-leaning voters.

Conclusion

In sum, our findings suggest that facial stereotypes regarding political affiliation influence voters, giving Republican-looking candidates an unexpected advantage in right-leaning states or, more specifically, among conservative voters. In addition to having clear and serious implications for the democratic process, these results are notable for at least two major theoretical reasons: First, most studies of appearance-based inferences and voting have focused on characteristics that are generally beneficial (e.g., competence) or generally detrimental for candidates to possess. For example, carrying out the same regression analyses for facial competence (instead of political facial stereotypes) showed that looking more competent than one's rival positively predicted the vote-shares of both Democratic and Republican participant-voters in Study 2 (all coefficients $>.50$, all p values $<.001$). Here, however, we examined a characteristic whose relationship to voting depends critically on the political context. Whereas having a competent-looking face seems to benefit politicians the world over (Lawson et al., 2010; Olivola & Todorov, 2010a), a conservative-looking face only seems to benefit those running in conservative areas. Second, previous evidence that voting is influenced by appearance-based inferences of personality characteristics could be rationalized on the grounds that voters lack clear, uncontested indicators regarding a candidate's actual personality traits (e.g., whether a candidate is *actually* more competent than his/her rival). Relying on candidate faces to infer these traits might be justifiable, to some extent, since objective information about personality characteristics is not available or difficult to obtain. In contrast, candidate political affiliation is clearly and repeatedly revealed during election campaigns (through the media) and even provided on the voting ballots themselves; yet, conservative voters still seem to be influenced by how Republican (vs. Democratic) candidates look. Our results thus suggest that the impact of appearance-based inferences is more robust than previously thought, persisting in the face of unambiguously more valid information. They further suggest that people vote not just according to party affiliation, but also according to the political attitudes that candidates seem to convey through their facial appearances. This apparent tendency of many voters to neglect objective information (i.e., candidate political affiliations, as printed on the voting ballots) when subjective, individuating cues are available (i.e., candidate appearances) is consistent with the literature on the Representativeness Heuristic (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), and adds to a growing body of evidence that relying on appearance cues often hinders our ability to draw accurate social inferences (Dunning, Griffin, Milojkovic, & Ross, 1990; Olivola & Todorov, 2010b).

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by a Newton International Fellowship from the Royal Society and The British Academy (to C.Y.O.). The authors thank Olivier Corneille, Klaus Fiedler, Jim Sherman, and two anonymous reviewers for providing helpful comments, and Jenny Porter for providing research assistance.

Notes

1. For simplicity, we use the terms “conservative,” “right-leaning,” “Republican” interchangeably in this article (similarly for “liberal,” “left-leaning,” and “Democrat”), though we realize they may not always overlap perfectly.
2. Guessing that a candidate is a Republican is equivalent to guessing that his/her rival is a Democrat (and vice versa). Guessing that a candidate is a Republican is also equivalent to guessing that the candidate is NOT a Democrat (and vice versa). Similarly, given how we calculated vote-shares, each vote for the Democratic candidate is a vote against the Republican candidate (and vice versa).

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