

Study links voters' choices to facial features

Posted By [Jenny Rempel](#) On October 31, 2008

Before visiting the voting booth on Tuesday, students may want to look in the mirror for any resemblance to John McCain or Barack Obama. According to a new Stanford study, voters seem to prefer candidates who resemble themselves.

In a study by Stanford researchers Jeremy Bailenson and Shanto Iyengar, voters are subconsciously attracted to candidates whose facial features resemble their own. Iyengar, a communication professor, and Bailenson, an assistant professor of communication, conducted three experiments to examine whether candidates' facial familiarity could sway votes.

A paper detailing their findings is set to be published in the December edition of "Public Opinion Quarterly."

"We wanted to take a very old concept in psychology — the idea that people love themselves — and see in this world of technology how it would affect voters' decisions," Bailenson said.

To do so, the duo used computers to blend candidates' faces with images of the test subjects' faces. The resulting photographs, produced with the software Magic Morph, merged 60 percent of the candidate's features and 40 percent of the test subject's natural features. This ratio provided a noticeable effect without allowing test subjects to realize that the candidates' photos had been merged with their own.

"In terms of understanding behavior, we've always known that people have a great affinity toward themselves, so that's nothing new," Bailenson said. "What's a new idea is, when you use this technology, nobody actually detects their own face has been blended — but on a subconscious level, there are large effects."

Their finding upsets a traditional assumption that people act logically when making voting decisions. Bailenson and Iyengar's research suggests that more superficial characteristics are actually at play.

John Nantz '09 thinks he evaluates candidates rationally, but he admits that the face phenomenon may come into play in his own life.

"I don't think I'm a bigot by any means, but I think people tend to support things they feel comfortable with," Nantz said. "Looks are one thing that people want to feel comfortable with, too."

Bailenson recognizes this behavioral pattern and thinks his findings may change researchers' outlook on voter behavior.

"The field of political science is dominated by this main idea that the voter is rational and uses substantive information to make her choice," Bailenson said. "But what we're showing is it's not just rational information, but how someone looks that also makes a big difference."

Still, facial similarity affects voters who are independents or who know less about the candidates more than it affects card-carrying party members.

Bailenson emphasized that the technology being used in the study was rather simple and widely accessible to the public. The algorithm for pixel blending used in morphing the images is about 20 years old, and it took an undergraduate working on the project less than half an hour to understand it.

One implication of this research is drawn from this very simplicity.

"There's really nothing fancy here on the technology end," Bailenson said. "It's technology that's easy to use, and given how much money politicians pay people to stuff envelopes, it's conceivable that they could pay people to merge photos."

With regard to next week's race for the presidency, Nantz was interested in the implications the study could have on voter preference.

"[Facial similarity] could be an issue since they're both such unique candidates," Nantz said. "One is an African American and one is an old, white man. It will be interesting to see how the cookie crumbles."

Iyengar said he recognizes this and is beginning research on how racial similarities affect voter preference.

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