

## **17.20 Introduction to the American Political Process**

Recitation: Rational Voters

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# What Explains Ordinary People's Voting Choice

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# Lecture Materials

- Intellectual History: Columbia School, Michigan School, and others.
- Three Modes of Voting:
  - Issue Voting: voters select politicians with policy platform that reflects voters' policy preferences 😊 😊
  - Retrospective Voting: people make voting decisions based on incumbent politicians' performance 😊
  - Identity Voting, Clientism, Vote Buying... 😊
- Do ordinary voters cast their ballots based on how good the candidates look?

# Facial Competence?

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- “Face Competence” is nothing new:



Image by Associated Press. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#). This image is in the public domain.

- Do candidates' appearances have *independent* impact on voters' choices?
- Is facial competence just a reflection of age, health, personal wealth, competent PR team or interest group endorsement?

- Atkinson et al. 2009 asked participants to rate the facial qualities of a pool of male candidates from 2004 House and 1990-2006 Senate elections.
- Obtained the facial scores of 972 congressional candidates
- Estimated the effect of candidate appearance on vote choice



- How good could a candidate look?



Sen. Russ Feingold (D-WI, 1993-2011)

Image by U.S. Senate Photographic Studio - Renee Bouchard. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#). This image is in the public domain.

- How ugly could a candidate look?



Sen. Spencer Abraham (R-MI, 1995-2001)

Image by Department of Energy. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#). This image is in the public domain.

- Who was the median?

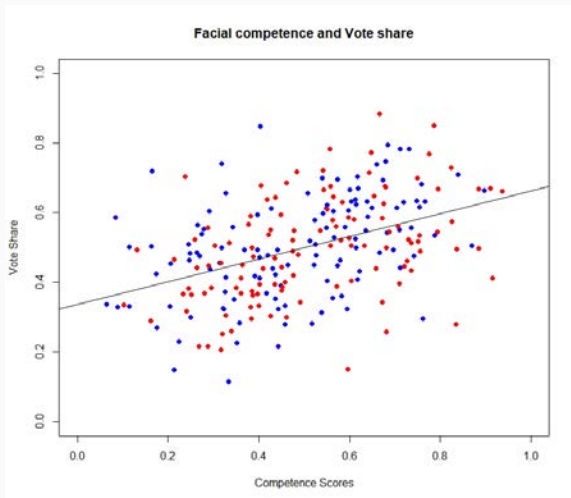


Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-KY)

Image by U.S. Government. Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#). This image is in the public domain.

- Facial competence and vote-share were correlated
- Conditioning on the election competitiveness and partisanship, the effect of facial quality was particularly pronounced for Senate Challengers.

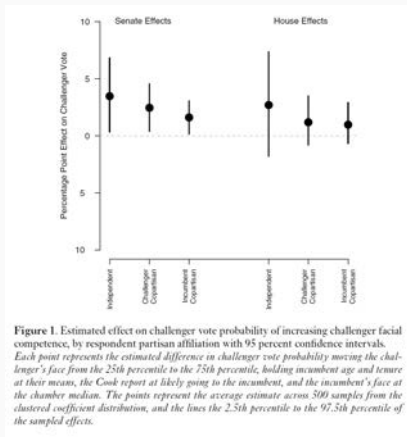
# Atkinson et al. 2009, Findings



Face and Vote Share

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Atkinson, Matthew D., Ryan D. Enos, et al. "Candidate Faces and Election Outcomes: Is the Face-Vote Correlation Caused by Candidate Selection?" *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 4, no. 3 (2009): 229–49. © Now Publishers, Inc. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

# Implications?

- Is facial quality a viable short-cut?

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