17.20 Introduction to the American Political Process
Recitation: Rational Voters
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1. What Explains Ordinary People’s Voting Choice

2. Facial Competence?
What Explains Ordinary People’s Voting Choice
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?
“Face Competence” is nothing new:
• 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

- 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](https://commons.wikimedia.org). 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?