CHAPTER 10

I LIKE HIM, BUT . . .: VOTE CHOICE WHEN CANDIDATE LIKEABILITY AND CLOSENESS ON ISSUES CLASH*

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The importance of likeability, broadly defined, has been understood by political candidates and their handlers probably for as long as campaigns have existed. Common phrases such as “clothes make the man [woman]” and “looks can be deceiving” tell us much about how human beings are impacted by the visual (Dion, Berscheid, and Walster 1972). But candidate likeability goes beyond the physical, including personality traits that may be explicitly or implicitly applied to a candidate, sometimes simply on the basis of physical appearance (Riggle et al. 1992). Social psychologists have long documented a “beauty is good” stereotype (Berscheid and Walster 1974) where more physically attractive people are assumed to possess a range of more positive personality traits and to generate a more positive emotional response.

Candidate physical attractiveness and personality clearly play some role, perhaps even the leading role, for many voters (Ottati 1990). It may be that in 2000, Vice-President Al Gore was at a distinct disadvantage to Texas Governor George Bush, given the general consensus that although quite knowledgeable on the issues—sort of a “policy wonk”—Gore appeared wooden and often less than likeable, while Bush despite his apparent limited grasp of many issue details, came across as warm and approachable. While campaign consultants know in their gut that likeability matters, a surprisingly limited amount of political science research has directly addressed the question of the role likeability plays when compared to other information voters may acquire.

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In an effort to fill some of this gap, we report a unique experiment where voters were exposed to presidential candidates in a simulated campaign. Some candidates were relatively good-looking with pleasant personalities—that is, they were likeable. At the same time, however, they were distant from the voter on the issues. Others candidates were ideologically close to the voter but sported less than attractive appearances and personalities. Throughout the course of the campaign, voters chose the information they wanted to learn about the candidates, and ultimately had to decide whether to support the more attractive candidate or the one who might better represent their policy interests. We find significant differences between political novices, who are more likely to be attracted to likeable candidates over issue-congruent ones, and experts, who seem more clearly focused on the issues.

Theoretical Background

In American presidential elections, voters can select from a wide variety of available information in making their choices. While not equally salient to all voters, issue positions, group endorsements, visual image, personality, and experience are all clearly important factors in distinguishing candidates (Lau and Redlawsk 1997, 2001a, 2001b). If all of these factors align themselves consistently in an election, the choice may be relatively easy. But we doubt this happens very frequently outside of the movies, where the hero is always smart, trustworthy, holds all the right issue positions, and looks like Robert Redford. More often, one candidate might have “good” positions on issues, but appear to have limited relevant experience. Another candidate might appear quite attractive physically and have a warm and likeable persona, but not be supported by the groups with which a voter identifies. What if voters have to choose between a candidate who is physically attractive and generally likeable (thus making the voter feel good) but on the wrong side of important issues, and one who takes issue positions more favorable to the voter but who is noticeably less attractive and sporting quite unlikeable traits that might generate a rather negative impression? What then? Do the cues inherent in physical image override the information provided by issue stands? And what if personality traits reinforce the physical image?

We believe that while candidate-centered information such as pictures or personality traits may seem less valuable than issue positions, this does not mean they carry no useful content. It is reasonable to think that a candidate’s personality is relevant information for what it signals about the potential behavior of the candidate if elected; a politician’s personality is highly likely to have some influence on how he or she chooses from the myriad of actions available in every situation (Greenstein 1969).