

# Beauty Premium in Politics? Perceptions and Political Behaviour

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## Abstract

Politics is a social endeavour and highly visible to the consumer (i.e. the citizen or constituent). It is therefore not surprising that a potential beauty premium in politics has been explored. However, most studies have focused on how beauty affects the success of candidates running for office. Whether beauty predicts the behaviour of incumbent politicians has remained unexplored. In this paper, we examine whether beauty exacerbates the principal-agent problem in politics for incumbent politicians by asking Australian survey participants to rate images of unfamiliar Swiss politicians. First, we show that beauty does *not* increase rent-seeking by politicians: exploiting mandatory disclosure of lobbying affiliations, we find that better-looking politicians are no more likely to be captured by interest groups. Second, we also find that better-looking politicians are no more likely to ignore the preferences of their constituents: beauty does *not* increase politicians' decisions to vote differently from their constituents on identically worded legislative proposals, i.e., the representation quality of constituents' interest is not affected by beauty. Both results tend to hold for left, right and centrist politicians, suggesting that the insignificance of the beauty premium for incumbent politicians is likely universal. There is some evidence that more beautiful politicians from the centre are less congruent with their party, i.e. diverge more from their party line.

**Keywords:** beauty, attractiveness, trustworthiness, competence, politician faces, voting behaviours

# 1 Introduction

A large body of literature demonstrates that “beauty matters” (Rosar et al., 2008, p. 64). Social scientists have found that a wide range of outcomes are related to beauty (Hamermesh, 2011), including wage premiums (Hamermesh & Biddle, 1994; Harper, 2000; Liu & Sierminska, 2014; Doorley & Sierminska, 2015), social status/prestige (Krantz, 1987; Anderson et al., 2001; Groggel et al., 2019), employability (Ruffle & Shtudiner, 2015), or university admissions (Ong, 2022). Beauty’s halo effect even extends to thinking that good-looking individuals share one’s personal views (Hermann & Shikano, 2016).

In politics, the literature has shown that appearance, and beauty in particular, confers an advantage in electoral contests (Todorov et al. 2005; Mattes & Milazzo 2014; Mattes et al. 2010; Banducci et al. 2008). However, much less is known about whether or how beauty matters once politicians are already elected, which is what we investigate in this paper. This question is important because the relationship between already-elected politicians and their constituents, their interest groups, and their party, is principal-agent in nature: Politicians have opportunities for moral hazard (i.e., acting in ways that are inconsistent with constituents’ or party preferences by favouring interest groups’ preferences; Potrafke 2013). Thus, this paper relates beauty to the principal-agent relationship to understand whether the moral hazard problem arises. To the best of our knowledge, only one other study (Gründler et al 2024) looks at the effect of beauty on the behaviour of already-serving politicians; more evidence is thus critically needed.

On the one hand, a *‘pessimistic’* view would suggest that better-looking, already-elected politicians expect to get away with using their political office for personal gain, against the preferences of their constituents. Since society tends to be more forgiving of better-looking people (Ma et al. 2015; Phillips & Hranek 2012), better-looking politicians may be more prone to moral hazard, e.g., by diverging more from the preferences of their constituents. On the other hand, a *‘realpolitik’* view would suggest that electoral incentives trump other considerations. Put simply, politicians may realise that they do not have much room for opportunistic behaviour because any disregard for the preferences of their constituents will ultimately be punished at the ballot box. In a world where politicians typically seek re-election, this would be a primary concern for the incumbent. In sum, whether or not an incumbent politician will behave opportunistically is an open empirical question.

We address this question in this paper. Our empirical operationalisation of the principal-agent problem is fourfold, with a total of three key dependent variables.<sup>1</sup> First, we use the mandatory disclosure of interest group affiliations to the Swiss parliament as a measure of politician “capturedness”. The relevant variation comes from the number of interest groups to which each politician belongs; having more lobby affiliations reflects a politician who is more inclined to listen to interest groups than to their constituents.

Second, and similarly, we restrict our attention to sectional interest groups, i.e., those representing particular industries or professional associations, such as banking or energy. Doing so relaxes our previous assumption that all interest groups are indicative of capture, focusing instead on those interest groups whose explicit mission is to pursue the interests of a small segment of society, with benefits accruing only to members, thereby distorting policy outcomes away from the interests of constituents.

Third, we examine whether politicians vote according to the wishes of their constituents on identically-worded legislative proposals, and thereby leverage the unique institutional setting of our data, allowing us to observe the revealed preferences of constituents on policy proposals that politicians have voted on in parliament (e.g., Portmann et al., 2022). Although we do not observe the reasons why a more-or-less beautiful politician might deviate from constituents’ preferences, we believe that such deviations are informative. In the principal-agent framework, an agent acting fully in line with their principals and without moral hazard would vote the same way as their constituents. Thus, deviations from voters’ preferences may be interpreted as evidence that a beautiful politician is maximising a utility function other than the one they were asked to maximise when they took office: that of the voter as the principal. We examine whether better-looking politicians are more prone to this form of moral hazard in the domain of politician representation, i.e., ignoring the preferences of their constituents and expecting to get away with it due to their beauty.

Across the board, our results suggest that the beauty premium for already-elected politicians is unimportant, in line with the *‘realpolitik’* view, and against the *‘pessimistic’* view (described above). Our results can be summarized as follows. First, we do not find evidence to suggest that better-looking politicians join more interest groups; if anything, the point estimate of beauty is negative (although we clearly do not suggest that better-looking politicians join

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<sup>1</sup> In addition, in Online Appendix A, we consider a different principal-agent problem from the view of the politician: the politician’s political party. The party in this setting expects the agent, i.e., the politician, to vote according to the party line. We therefore compare the votes of individual politicians with the majority decision of their parties, as taken at the respective party congress. This allows us to see whether better-looking politicians are more likely to ignore the party line.

fewer interest groups). Second, we do not find evidence that better-looking politicians vote against the preferences of their constituents.<sup>2</sup> Third, and more generally, we do not detect meaningful differences between political parties, suggesting that the unimportance of beauty for already-elected politicians holds across the political spectrum. This also holds for potential measures of political competence, such as whether politicians hold a university degree. Fourth, in a benchmarking exercise, we show that the quantitative importance of beauty with respect to our measures capturing aspects of the principal-agent relationship is indeed small, such that the non-significance of beauty is not a statistical artefact of a ‘true’ but noisily measured relationship.

## 2 Related Literature

Beauty's impact has been widely explored across different domains, with studies (e.g., Berri et al., 2011) indicating that attractiveness correlates with perceived superior skills, competences, and character traits. Eagly et al. (1991) reveal that attractiveness enhances perceptions of social and intellectual competencies among individuals. Such perceptions benefits individuals in professional sports, academia (Hamermesh and Parker, 2005; Bi et al., 2020), and mating markets (Price & Vandenberg, 1979; Feingold, 1988; Rhodes et al., 2005), where attractive people often receive favourable treatment and recognition.

The political sphere, including Swiss politics (Lutz 2010), is not exempt from the impact of attractiveness. King and Leigh (2009), Berggren et al. (2017), and Potrafke et al. (2020) establish that physically attractive politicians enjoy advantages in terms of voter perception and electoral success. The perception of beauty can influence voting behaviour, media attention, and even independence from party influences. The face serves as a significant source of social and interpersonal cues, offering valuable information to observers. Ballew and Todorov (2007), Olivola and Todorov (2010), and Todorov et al. (2008) demonstrate that snap judgments of perceived competence based on facial appearance can accurately predict election outcomes. These image-based judgments are readily accessible and do not require substantial cognitive effort from voters at the ballot box.

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<sup>2</sup> Or against the expectations of their political parties (as reported in Online Appendix A); with one (qualified) exception: better-looking centrist politicians are more likely to disregard the party line ( $\beta_{beauty|centrist=1} < 0$ ) but do not differ significantly from other politicians in doing so ( $\beta_{beauty|centrist=1} - \beta_{beauty|left=1} = 0$ ;  $\beta_{beauty|centrist=1} - \beta_{beauty|right=1} = 0$ ).

Evolutionary traits such as facial appearance, height, and body shape, still play a salient role in the allocation of individuals to leadership positions, with certain visual characteristics (e.g., age-related cues) implying suitability for specific roles or situations (Little, 2014; Spisak et al., 2014). Research has also explored how masculinity markers are linked with political behaviour, indicating that more masculine-looking male politicians are less amenable to being controlled by voters or lobby groups. Thus, they are less likely to make decisions in line with constituents' preferences and have fewer interest group connections, meaning that they seem to be more dominant and less controllable (Chan et al., 2021).

Taken together, these findings underscore the pervasive role of physical attractiveness in social and professional dynamics, suggesting multiple avenues for future research in appearance-based judgments.

### **3 Background, Data, and Methods**

#### **3.1 Participants**

In this paper we extend on our previous work and data collected (Chan et al., 2021) by focusing on beauty, an aspect that we have not yet explored. We conducted an online survey among Australian residents in which 157 individuals participated (59% female). The survey was accessible to the public for 80 days (February 24 to May 15, 2015). Participants were shown images of 69 Swiss politicians (52 males; 15 females) from the Council of States (Upper House of Parliament). The sample consists of *all* Council of States members who were politically active between 2013 and 2014.<sup>3</sup> We ask the participants to rate the image of all politicians on 10 different characteristics (“Handsome/Beautiful”, “Knowledgeable”, “Fair”, “Sincere”, “Qualified”, “Trustworthy”, “Honest”, “Ethical”, “Attractive”, and “Charming”). A large majority were students (74%;  $n = 116$ ) as the survey was advertised in a first-year undergraduate unit (age range: 16-45,  $M=24.1$ ,  $SD=5.73$ ). The remaining 41 participants were from a non-student population, recruited from social media sites connected to the university such as the university Facebook page (age range of the 41 non-student participants: 19-66,  $M=27$ ,  $SD=11.76$ ). No time limit was placed on the completion of the survey. Participation was incentivized by offering entry into a lucky draw prize of an iPad tablet (valued at approximately USD 450). We dropped the ratings from 10 of the participants (9 of which are from the student

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<sup>3</sup> The upper house of the Federal Assembly consists of 46 seats.

population) whose responses did not vary for at least one of the 10 characteristics (i.e., they gave the same rating score for each politician). Thus, the final number of raters is 147.

## 3.2 Politician Images

We use official images from each politician’s profile, provided by the Swiss Parliamentary Services, who took them on a standardized, neutral background. Thus, the candidates are presented with a certain level of homogeneity also in terms of camera-to-head distance and focal length (distance between a camera’s focus and the centre of the lens). The professional portraits reflect how politicians themselves wish to be seen by constituents, as they know in advance the date on which photographs are taken. We focus on majority-elected politicians from the Council of States. The members of the Council of States are elected by majority rule in two round elections and serve a four-year term, without term limits.

Poutvaara et al. (2009) point out a core strength of their study is their use of raters from a country other than Finland (assessing images from Finnish election candidates). Similarly, Chan et al. (2022) show that raters who are more familiar with the subjects being rated are more likely to assign a higher evaluation. Our dataset has comparable advantages in terms of ruling out potential familiarity with the politicians. Australian residents<sup>4</sup> were not familiar with those images, nor were they informed that they were images of (Swiss) politicians. None of the participants have a Swiss background. We used the following neutral instruction as a background information to evaluate the images: “We would now like to know your perceptions of several people based only on their picture. Looking at the picture on the left, how would you rate this person with respect to the attributes given below?” (Scale: 1. Extremely low, 2. Very low, 3. Low, 4. Average, 5. High, 6. Very High, 7. Extremely High). An example screenshot of the rating task is shown in Figure A1 (for an overview of the perceived best-looking politicians (males and females) see Figure A2). In Chan et al. (2021), we only focused on male

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<sup>4</sup> Despite cultural differences, we posit that Australia and Switzerland share similar aesthetic standards as they are, to use the terminology coined by Joe Henrich, both WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) nations. Therefore, there is thus some reason to expect behavioural regularities in the two countries (e.g., in terms of evaluating beauty). Referencing the seminal work of Ronald Inglehart and Christian Welzel on the World Values Survey, Australia and Switzerland, while in different cultural regions (English-Speaking and Protestant Europe), show close proximity in cultural value coordinates on the Inglehart-Welzel Cultural Map (refer to: <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSContents.jsp?CMSID=Findings>). Further, the Euclidean distance between Australia and Switzerland is approximately the same as the Euclidean distance between Australia and Canada. The latter pair of countries have much in common in terms of historical trajectory, having both been British colonies, remaining in the Commonwealth, and have broadly similar economies relying on minerals and services. Thus, it is plausible that Australia and Switzerland, while clearly not identical, are not so dissimilar as to raise significant cross-cultural concerns as far as the validity of our results, insofar that beauty is a cultural construct.

politicians as the focus was on masculinity cues. All participants progressed through the images in the same pre-determined randomised order.

### 3.3 Beauty and Trait Perceptions

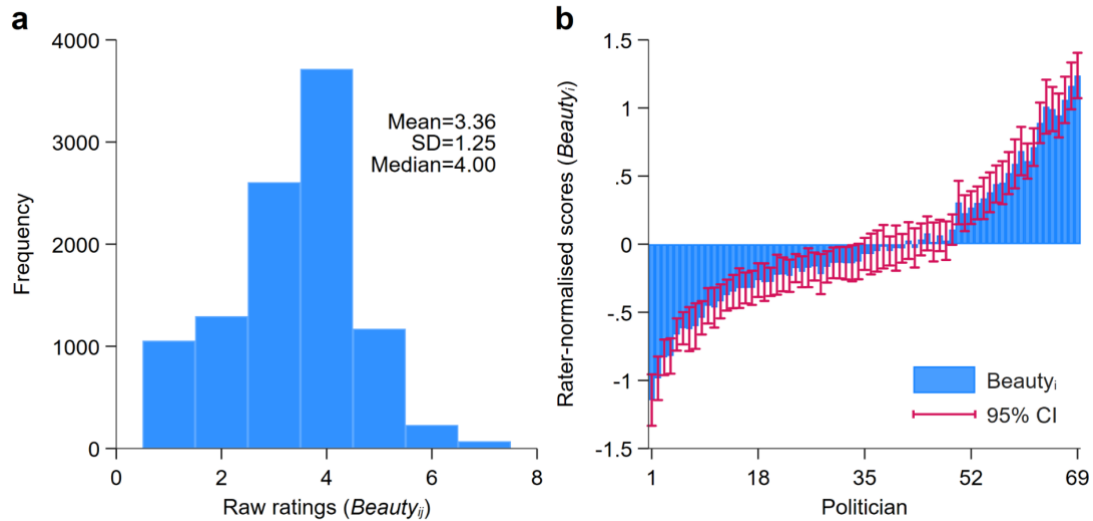
We employ the *Handsome/Beautiful* ratings to construct the measure of aesthetic appeal of the sample politicians. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Hamermesh and Leigh, 2022; Chan et al., 2022), we devise the beauty measure by calculating the mean of rater-normalised scores. This method accounts for the variability in beauty perception among raters as well as within-rater heterogeneity.<sup>5</sup> We first normalise the raw ratings by subtracting each rater's average ( $\mu_j$ ) from the raw rating ( $Beauty_{ij}$ ) and then dividing the result by the rater's standard deviation ( $\sigma_j$ ). Subsequently, we calculate the mean of these standardised scores for each of the 69 politicians to form the beauty measure ( $Beauty_i$ ):

$$Beauty_i = \frac{1}{J} * \sum_{j=1}^J \frac{Beauty_{ij} - \mu_j}{\sigma_j} \quad (1)$$

where  $Beauty_{ij}$  is the raw rating of *handsome/beautiful* (1-7 Likert score) given by rater  $j \in \{1, \dots, J\}$  to politician  $i \in \{1, \dots, I\}$ . Figure 1a shows the distributions of the 10,143 raw ratings ( $Beauty_{ij}$ ). The mean raw beauty rating is 3.36 (SD=1.25) and the median is 4, suggesting the distribution is right skewed. Panel b of Figure 1 ranks the politician by the rater-normalised beauty scores and shows the between-rater variations (95% CI).

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<sup>5</sup> Figure A3 in the Online Appendix shows the distributions of the average ( $\mu_j$ ) and standard deviation ( $\sigma_j$ ) of beauty ratings of the 147 raters.



**Figure 1.** Distribution of beauty ratings. **a)** 10,143 raw ratings ( $Beauty_{ij}$ ) by 147 raters. **b)** Rater-normalised beauty score of the 69 Swiss politicians.

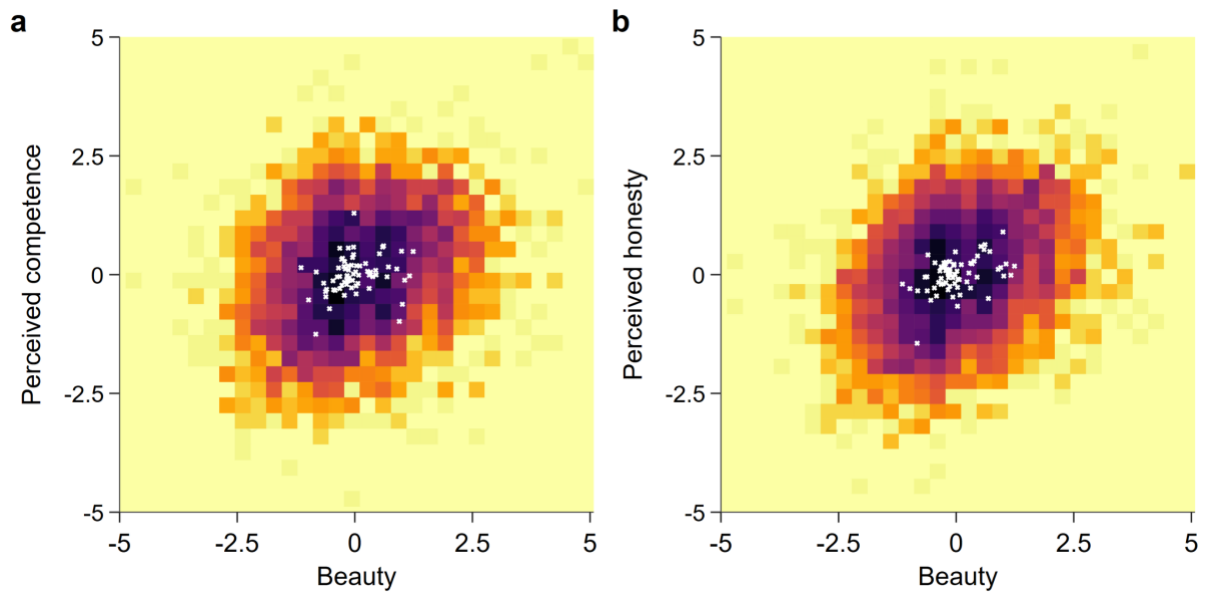
When considering to what extent beauty can be related to political behaviour, one needs to consider the intricate relationship between an individual’s physical appearance and the perception of their personal traits, such as honesty and competence. For example, due to the psychological propensity for individuals to extrapolate from initial aesthetic judgments, one might form the broader character assessments more positively if the subject is perceived as more aesthetically appealing (e.g., “halo effect”). For example, Berggren et al. (2010) find that perception of beauty, competence, and trustworthiness are positively correlated with each other. Our data also suggest moderate positive correlations between beauty and perceived competence and honesty (Figure 2).<sup>6</sup> Specifically, politicians who are deemed more beautiful are also perceived to be more competent (politician-level:  $\rho = 0.23$ ,  $p = 0.058$ ,  $n = 69$ ; rating-level:  $\rho = 0.27$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $n = 10,131$ ) and honest (politician-level:  $\rho = 0.438$ ,  $p = 0.0002$ ,  $n = 69$ ; rating-level:  $\rho = 0.338$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $n = 10,130$ ).<sup>7</sup> In Online Appendix B, we demonstrate that beauty and perceptions of honesty and competence are highly correlated. However, we did not find evidence suggesting that beauty or perceived competence predict actual competence,

<sup>6</sup> We apply principal component analysis (PCA) to the rater-normalised ratings of *Trustworthy*, *Sincere*, *Fair*, *Ethical*, and *Honest* to construct the measure perceived honesty (first principal component, see Table A1). Similarly, perceived competence is constructed from taking the first principal component of the normalised ratings of *Knowledgeable* and *Qualified*.

<sup>7</sup> In a validation exercise, we show that the positive pairwise correlations between beauty and the two other perceived traits were not artefacts of the fact that they are constructed from the same raters (e.g., halo effect). Specifically, we randomly split the raters’ sample into three subsamples and examining the cross-subsample correlations between the three traits. We perform this 500 times (with replacement) and show the distributions of the correlations in Figure A4.



as measured by the politicians' qualifications, i.e., all our interpretations hold when accounting for evaluations of perceived competence.



**Figure 2.** Positive correlations between beauty and (a) perceived competence and (b) perceived honesty of Swiss politicians. *Notes:* Markers represent average trait values of each politician. Coloured backdrop shows the (log) number of respondent-politician ratings.

### 3.4 Interest Groups

According to Swiss law, Swiss legislators must fully disclose all interest group affiliations they. These affiliations include a wide range of relationships, such as holding executive board seats in companies and foundations, being members of committees, engaging in expert and counselling activities, as well as participating in other lobby group activities. The Swiss Parliamentary Services collect this information and make it accessible to the public through an online register that is available for consultation (Stadelmann et al., 2016; Gava et al., 2017; Péclat & Puddu, 2017; Portmann et al., 2022). The register is frequently referred to in media reports.

Our primary interest group-related outcome variable is the total number of interest group affiliations each legislator has on an annual basis. In a principal-agent framework where the agent does not act opportunistically, a politician's primary duties are to their constituents. Thus, in an ideal world, a politician driven solely by caring for his constituents would not need to have any interest group affiliations. Political behaviour in general, and representation of constituents' preferences specifically, should be driven entirely by what the constituents

actually want. On the other hand, a politician with many interest group affiliations may be less likely to pursue their constituent's wishes and more likely to pursue their interest groups' wishes. Our interest group affiliations variable is therefore a potential measure of political rent-seeking or "capturedness", i.e. having more interest group affiliation is an indicator that politicians might care less about their actual principal, i.e. their constituents.<sup>8</sup>

Our second interest group-related outcome variable is the number of affiliations with *sectional* interest groups (see Stadelmann et al 2016 for a classification). Drawing inspiration from the work of Stewart (1958) and Giger and Klüver (2016), sectional interest groups are those which represent the interests of particular industries and/or professional associations, such as banking or energy. Sectional interest groups are often viewed with more concern than other groups in the sense that they restrict any benefits from lobbying to a small number of members (Hopkins et al 2019) and thus, epitomize the idea of politician "capture". If beauty matters at all for interest group affiliations, one would therefore expect better-looking politicians to be affiliated with the more lucrative sectional interest groups.

### 3.5 Voter Congruence

In Switzerland, the final roll call votes by legislators take place at the end of a parliamentary session. The sessions of the Council of States have been recorded since the winter of 2006, which allows to identify the individual voting behaviour of politicians (see Stadelmann et al., 2019). Swiss parliamentary decisions do not necessarily become laws, as Swiss citizens may challenge those decisions in a referendum. Referendum decisions take place four times per year, except during election years, when only three Sundays are reserved for referenda. Signature requirements for referenda challenging laws are low and referenda are mandatory for all constitutional changes (see, e.g., Portmann, 2014 and Hessami, 2016). Referendum decisions are also legally binding, i.e. the referendum decision is implemented. Crucially, both voters in referenda and MPs in Parliament decide on identically worded legislative proposals.

Due to the referendum process, decisions of MPs and their constituents are observable and can be straightforwardly compared. We interpret voter congruence (an MP voting in the same way as their constituents) as an indication of an agent (the MP) that respects the principal's (voters') preferences. If a beauty premium exists in this domain, then better-looking MPs should be able to "get away" with ignoring their constituents more often, and one would predict smaller voter congruence for better-looking MPs.

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<sup>8</sup> For a recent overview on the political economy of lobbying see Mause and Polk (2024).

## 4 Main Results

### 4.1 Perception Correlates: Beauty, Competence, and Honesty

To better grasp how opinions regarding actual individuals (in this case politicians) are correlated, we estimate the associations between perceived variables (beauty, competence, and honesty) using the models below. The first set of specifications have the following structure using perceived beauty as an independent variable:

$$\text{Perceived Competence}_{ij} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 \text{Beauty}_{ij} + u_{ij} \quad (2)$$

$$\text{Perceived Honesty}_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Beauty}_{ij} + v_{ij} \quad (3)$$

These specifications allow us to study how much beauty matters in how respondents ( $j$ ) form opinions of politicians ( $i$ ) with respect to the attributes that really matter, particularly in the political process (competence and honesty). Transferred to politics, this reflects a view that people should vote for candidates that are qualified for the job; or alternatively candidates that do their job honestly.

However, the main specifications assume that beauty is the only thing we see about people, then we decide how we feel about them in other regards. As the literature has shown, this is not the case (see, e.g., literature on facial width-to-height ratio (fWHR) or perceived trustworthiness). Thus, we also estimate the following specification:

$$\text{Perceived Competence}_{ij} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 \text{Beauty}_{ij} + \alpha_2 \text{Perceived Honesty}_{ij} + u_{ij} \quad (4)$$

Eq. (4) gives us a beauty premium, taking into account how honest the representative appears, as directly inferred only from their photograph. However, such a specification may suffer from a bad control problem (Angrist and Pischke 2009). If *Perceived Honesty* is a consequence of *Beauty*, then including *Perceived Honesty* in the specification will tend to reduce the coefficient of *Beauty* and make it misleadingly small. In other words, it is a comparatively conservative route, which gives us a likely lower bound on the “pure beauty” premium. We can think of it as “pure beauty” because it is not attributable to honesty.

In the interest of completeness, we also estimate:

$$\text{Perceived Honesty}_{ij} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Beauty}_{ij} + \beta_2 \text{Perceived Competence}_{ij} + v_{ij} \quad (5)$$

Estimating Eq. (5) also makes sense if one believes competence can also be inferred from politician faces. At any rate, Eq. (5) allows  $\beta_1$  to be interpreted as the correlation between beauty and perceived honesty that is not attributable to perceived competence.

#### 4.1.1 “Generalised” Beauty Premium

In our analysis, we find the positive relationships between beauty and perceived honesty and beauty and competence hold with varying fixed effects strategies (Table 1). Extending upon the baseline model (cols. 1 & 7, estimated by ordinary least squares (OLS)), we report the fixed effects (FE) estimates for politician (cols. 3 & 9). We estimate the standard errors clustered at the respondent level in these models. We clustered the standard errors at the respondent level to adjust for the fact that ratings were not drawn randomly from a population but were given by some individuals within a given sample. Whilst we ask the respondents to rate *all* politicians (population of Swiss elected politicians), this can be viewed as having repeated measures for each politician, and thus the errors can be correlated across ratings of the same politicians. Nevertheless, we find the OLS and FE estimates are highly robust to using SEs clustered at the politician level. Furthermore, we show estimates from two random slope models (cols. 3-4 & 7-8), which allows for the coefficients to differ across *individual* respondents ( $\delta_{1i}$  term in Eq. 6) and politicians ( $\zeta_{1j}$  term in Eq. 7) with  $\gamma_1$  representing the grand slope of interest. Standard errors of these specifications are clustered at the respective group level.

$$\text{Perceived Competence/Honesty}_{ij} = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 \text{Beauty}_{ij} + \delta_{0i} + \delta_{1i} \text{Beauty}_{ij} + u_{ij} \quad (6)$$

$$\text{Perceived Competence/Honesty}_{ij} = \gamma_0 + \gamma_1 \text{Beauty}_{ij} + \zeta_{0j} + \zeta_{1j} \text{Beauty}_{ij} + u_{ij} \quad (7)$$

Overall, we find that beauty is strongly and positively associated with how respondents perceive the level of competence of the unknown-to-them Swiss politicians. Specifically, a 1 standard deviation (SD) increase in beauty corresponds to 0.276 to 0.313 SD increase in competence perception. In terms of how honest respondents think politicians are, we observe

an even stronger relationship with 0.34 to 0.357 SD increases in perceived honesty per 1 SD increase in beauty.

**Table 1.** “Generalised” beauty premium on perception of competence and honesty

	<i>Perceived competence</i>			
	OLS	FE	Random slope	
	(1)	(3)	(3)	(4)
	Baseline	Politician	Respondent	Politician
Beauty	0.276*** [0.025]	0.313*** [0.025]	0.277*** [0.025]	0.313*** [0.012]
Observations	10,137	10,137	10,137	10,137
R-squared	0.075	0.220		
	<i>Perceived honesty</i>			
	OLS	FE	Random slope	
	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Baseline	Politician	Respondent	Politician
Beauty	0.340*** [0.025]	0.357*** [0.025]	0.341*** [0.025]	0.340*** [0.025]
Observations	10,130	10,130	10,130	10,130
R-squared	0.114	0.210		

Notes. DV: Cols. 1-4: Perceived competence; Cols. 5-8: Perceived honesty. OLS: Ordinary least squares. FE: Fixed Effects. Robust standard errors in brackets are clustered at the respondent level ( $n = 147$ , cols. 1-3 & 5-7) and politician level ( $n = 69$ , cols. 4 & 8). All specifications include a constant. \*\*\*, \*\* and \* denote significance at the 1, 5 and 10% levels, respectively.

#### 4.1.2 “Pure” Beauty Premium

In Table 2, we condition the effect of beauty on perceived trustworthiness (cols. 1-4) or competence (cols. 5-8). As discussed above, this is a conservative strategy because of the bad control problem. The partial effects we get for Beauty can be thought of as a “pure” beauty premium. Whilst the estimates of beauty premium in each model do in fact reduce sharply (compared to their counterpart in Table 1), they remain highly significant (all  $p < 0.01$ ) and conceptually meaningful. For instance, 1 SD increase in beauty corresponds to 0.089-0.124 SD increase, on average, in perceived competence, holding constant the perceived honesty of the politician. We again observe a stronger association between beauty and perceived honesty where politicians with 1 SD higher score for beauty are thought to be 0.19-0.201 SD more honest, keeping inferred competence fixed.

One interesting question we can ask is how much of the beauty premium for “competence” is explained by perceptions of honesty. An estimate can be obtained by taking one minus the ratio between  $\alpha_1$  of Eq. 4 and Eq. 2 (coefficient of beauty in Table 2 and Table 1). The results across the four columns are stable, with perceptions of honesty accounting for 61 to 68% of the size of the “generalised” beauty premium. This again speaks to the problem with bad controls, and would suggest the coefficients obtained from Table 1 are likely upper bound estimates, yet stable across specifications. Likewise, comparing the beauty estimates between Eqs. 3 and 4 ( $\beta_1$ ) suggests perceived competence explains 41 to 47% of the beauty premium towards honesty. In sum, we find the “pure” beauty premium remains despite implementing such a stringent approach. Taking the lower bound of the 95% confidence intervals of the beauty estimates from the random respondent slope model (cols. 3 and 7 in Table 2), a 1 SD increase in beauty leads to a 0.07 (0.17) SD increase in perceived *competence* (*honesty*) or an approximately 5% (18%) rise, in percentage terms. Putting this in perspective, the results suggest that a comparison of two (randomly sampled) politicians – whose beauty differs by 1 SD – on the basis of which looks more competent or honest, the better-looking politician would win by a margin of *at least* 47.5-52.5 and 41-59, respectively.

**Table 2.** “Pure” beauty premium – Conditioning beauty premia on perceived competence/honesty

	<i>Perceived competence</i>			
	OLS	FE	Random slope	
	(1)	(3)	(3)	(4)
	Baseline	Politician	Respondent	Politician
Beauty	0.089*** [0.013]	0.124*** [0.013]	0.097*** [0.014]	0.123*** [0.010]
Perceived honesty	0.552*** [0.020]	0.527*** [0.019]	0.527*** [0.020]	0.528*** [0.011]
Observations	10,126	10,126	10,126	10,126
R-squared	0.345	0.439		
	<i>Perceived honesty</i>			
	OLS	FE	Random slope	
	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	Baseline	Politician	Respondent	Politician
Beauty	0.194*** [0.015]	0.190*** [0.015]	0.201*** [0.016]	0.192*** [0.011]
Perceived competence	0.529*** [0.022]	0.533*** [0.022]	0.503*** [0.022]	0.533*** [0.012]
Observations	10,126	10,126	10,126	10,126
R-squared	0.372	0.432		

Notes. DV: Cols. 1-4: Perceived competence; Cols. 5-8: Perceived honesty. OLS: Ordinary least squares. FE: Fixed Effects. Robust standard errors in brackets are clustered at the respondent level ( $n = 147$ , cols. 1-3 & 5-7) and politician level ( $n = 69$ , cols. 4 & 8). All specifications include a constant. \*\*\*, \*\* and \* denote significance at the 1, 5 and 10% levels, respectively.

Additionally, the findings on beauty premium are insensitive to using the sub-characteristics of each trait, as opposed to the first principal component. The results remain stable when controlled for all five characteristics of honesty with competence broken down into knowledgeable and qualified. Likewise, the estimates of beauty premium on inferred honesty are highly robust to controlling for the sub-characteristics of competence or using the sub-characteristics of honesty as the dependent variable. Finally, restricting the sample by the politicians’ or respondents’ gender do impact the beauty estimates in a significant way.

## 4.2 Does beauty affect politicians' behaviour?

### 4.2.1 Empirical Approach

To see whether politicians (and which political parties) benefit from beauty premia, exploiting beauty for private gain by joining interest groups, we estimate variations of:

$$\ln(\text{Interest Groups}_{it}) = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 \text{Beauty}_i + \alpha_2 \text{Party}_i + \gamma(\text{Beauty}_i * \text{Party}_i) + \mathbf{W}\delta + u_{it} \quad (8)$$

where  $\text{Interest Groups}_{it}$  is the number of interest group politician  $i$  affiliated with in year  $t$ ,  $\text{Beauty}$  is a continuous measure of politician's beauty (mean rater-normalised scores) and  $\text{Party}$  is classified into three levels: *Left*, *Centre*, and *Right*, with the reference category as *Centre*. We take the logarithm of the number of interest groups plus 1 as the dependent variable.

The vector  $\mathbf{W}$  includes fixed effects (canton and year)<sup>9</sup> and control variables, which includes politician characteristics such as demographics (e.g., gender, age, and education level) and election outcomes. Importantly, we control for a set of electoral characteristics to account for the fact that our sample focuses only on elected politicians, which may lead to a sample selection issue. That is, if beauty indeed plays a role in facilitating political success, examining only elected politicians would negatively bias the effect estimate of beauty on the in-office outcomes. We thus include four variables capturing varying levels of electoral support: *chamber changer*, which denotes politicians who moved from the lower house (proportional representation election) to the upper house (majority election) (Portmann et al., 2022); *political competitors*, which is the number of candidates in the first round of voting; *margin of victory*, the difference between the share of votes cast for the elected politician and the non-elected candidate with the highest votes in the first ballot<sup>10</sup>; and *silent vote*, which indicates that the politician was elected in an uncontested election. In addition, to isolate the effect of beauty from other characteristics based on appearance, we also control for the perceived level of competence and honesty (based on the first principal component of the related traits).

In the second part of the analysis, we explore whether politicians exploit a potential beauty premium to deviate from their constituents, i.e., whether their decision in parliament matches those of their constituents in referendum decisions, holding the electoral

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<sup>9</sup> In particular, the canton fixed effects allow us to account for cantonal differences in the mode of election to the Council of States. For example, Appenzell Innerrhoden holds elections for either chamber on different dates, Neuchâtel and Jura use proportional representation (instead of two rounds of majority-plurality voting), and Glarus allows constituents to vote from age 16.

<sup>10</sup> For councilors who were elected in an uncontested election (*Stille Wahl*), in which the number of candidates is the same as of fewer than the number of seats, and for the canton of Appenzell Innerrhoden, where voting is done by raising hands in support of a motion (*Landsgemeinde*), we code the margin of victory as 100.



characteristics such as margins of victory constant. We thus estimate a linear probability model with *Voter Congruence* as the dependent variable. The unit of observation in these specifications is the politician-referendum ( $i-k$ ):

$$\Pr(\text{Voter Congruence}_{ik}) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Beauty}_i + \beta_2 \text{Party}_i + \theta(\text{Beauty}_i * \text{Party}_i) + \mathbf{W}\tau + v_{ik} \quad (9)$$

We also estimate a similar model looking at voting differences between the politician and his or her party in Online Appendix A.

#### 4.2.2 Beauty and Interest Group Affiliations

In Table 3, we first show the estimate for beauty on the total number of interest groups without any covariates (col. 1), including year and canton fixed effects (col. 2), and politician and electoral characteristics (col. 3). In cols. 4 to 6, we report the estimates on  $\gamma$ , which represent the relative degree of beauty premia exploitation of the political party (relative to *Centre*).

Our first observation is that, on average, beauty is somewhat negatively associated to the number of interest group affiliations. For example, politicians with 1 SD higher beauty have 31 to 35% fewer interest group affiliations.<sup>11</sup> This result indicates that, contrary to the argument that better-looking politicians use their beauty to leverage outside opportunities, potential side incomes or other types of support by way of interest group affiliations, the opposite, if anything, seems to be true. In general, previous literature finds that more beautiful people have higher wages, but we ought to note that politicians are already a hyper-selected group. Thus, empirically, it appears likely that for this selective group, beauty does not matter in terms of interest group affiliations, and our results thereby qualify the existing literature.

How important or unimportant is this first-order effect of beauty, relative to that of other variables? In Online Appendix Figure C1, we show that the magnitude of the beauty effect we find in Column 3, which estimates a single slope for *Beauty*, is smaller than the effect of having a postgraduate degree, age, time in parliament, and perceived competence. If there is any link between beauty and interest group affiliations of politicians, it is not positive.<sup>12</sup> Thus, although the results in Table 3 indicate a negative and somewhat significant effect of beauty, this benchmarking exercise allows us to rule out large effects with a high degree of confidence.

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<sup>11</sup> One should note that the unconditional effect of beauty (col. 1) is not significant, and column (2) indicates that the 95 percent confidence intervals range from -64 percent to +1.3 percent.

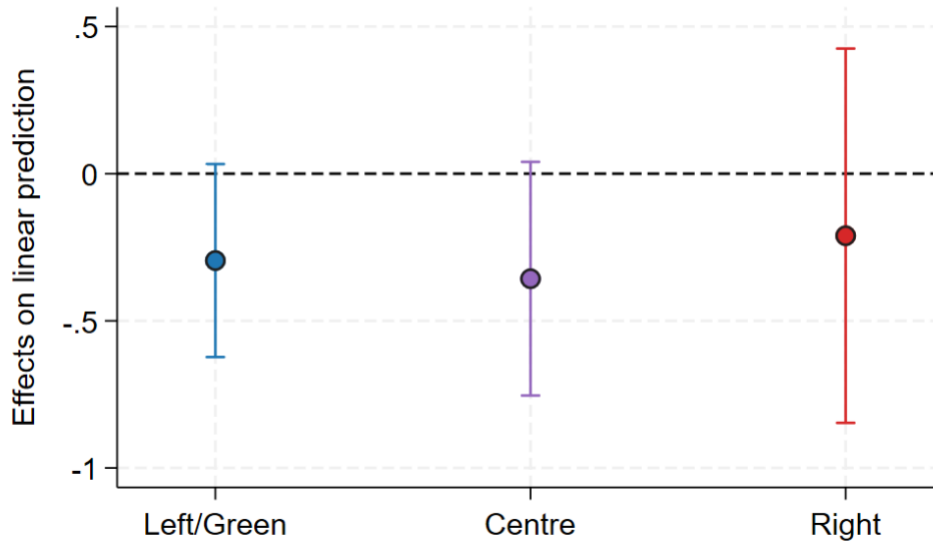
<sup>12</sup> Recent evidence suggest that political connections are not necessarily beneficial for firms (see Wang and Yu, 2021).

When examining whether politicians from certain parties are *relatively* more likely than others to exploit the beauty premium (cols. 4-6), we find the negative effect of beauty on overall interest group affiliations seems to be different across different political parties. Beauty has statistically insignificant coefficients for left- and right-wing politicians, but a negative and statistically significant coefficient for centre politicians. When estimating the average marginal effect for each party, we note that the relationship is not significantly different from zero for Right-wing politicians and the 95 percent CsI range from -75 and -62 percent to +4 and +3.3 percent for Centre and Left-wing politicians, respectively). However, when separately estimating the relationship for politicians of each party, our main results can be summarized in Figure 3. There we report the marginal effect of beauty by political leaning (left, centre, right). None of the three effects is significant at the 5% level, and none of the three is statistically different from any of the others (Wald p-values: 0.70; 0.80; 0.81).

**Table 3.** Beauty and interest group affiliations, by political party.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	
			$\ln(\text{Interest Groups})$				
Beauty	-0.211 [0.143]	-0.311* [0.163]	-0.317** [0.134]	-0.120 [0.216]	-0.609** [0.237]	-0.357* [0.203]	
Beauty * Left				-0.070 [0.335]	0.334 [0.248]	0.062 [0.247]	
Beauty * Right				-0.111 [0.730]	0.395 [0.743]	0.146 [0.375]	
Left			-0.851*** [0.181]	-0.681*** [0.160]	-0.773*** [0.167]	-0.861*** [0.172]	
Right			-0.533*** [0.134]	-0.442* [0.256]	-0.781*** [0.266]	-0.559*** [0.164]	
Perceived Competence			0.680** [0.329]			0.641 [0.420]	
Perceived Honesty			-0.495 [0.384]			-0.485 [0.404]	
Female			0.157 [0.296]			0.126 [0.350]	
Age			0.156*** [0.054]			0.159*** [0.055]	
Age sq.			-0.002*** [0.001]			-0.002*** [0.001]	
Children Dummy			-0.023 [0.232]			-0.007 [0.242]	
Married			-0.294* [0.158]			-0.297* [0.158]	
Army Officer			0.080 [0.144]			0.078 [0.150]	
Postgraduate degree			0.277*** [0.103]			0.267** [0.109]	
Time in Parliament			0.109*** [0.018]			0.109*** [0.018]	
Time in Parliament sq.			-0.004*** [0.001]			-0.004*** [0.001]	
Chamber Changer			-0.264 [0.204]			-0.247 [0.206]	
Political Competitors			-0.034 [0.022]			-0.033 [0.021]	
Margin of Victory			-0.011*** [0.003]			-0.011*** [0.003]	
Silent Vote			0.601** [0.250]			0.611** [0.248]	
Observations	326	326	326	326	326	326	
R-squared	0.018	0.394	0.710	0.173	0.521	0.710	
Year FE	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	
Canton FE	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	

Notes. DV =  $\ln(\text{Interest groups}+1)$ . FE: Fixed Effects. Standard errors clustered at politician level in brackets. All specifications include a constant. \*\*\*, \*\* and \* denote significance at the 1, 5 and 10% levels respectively.



**Figure 3.** Marginal effect of beauty by political affiliation. Capped spikes are 95% confidence intervals.

Having found in Table 3 (with some certainty) that beauty does not come with a positive premium in terms of interest group affiliations, we study sectional lobbying groups more specifically in Table 4. A similar pattern emerges from the data: beauty is insignificant in the uninteracted model (Column 3), and quantitatively small in the benchmarking exercise (Online Appendix C) relative to age and time in parliament. In Columns (4) and (5), there is some indication that left-wing politicians receive a beauty penalty; however, this result is likely an artefact of selection bias. Controlling for selection into the sample of elected politicians in Column (6) nullifies the effect. In Online Appendix Figure C2, analogously to Figure 3, we plot the marginal effect of beauty on sectional interest groups by political affiliation; the results again indicate a zero effect.

**Table 4.** Beauty and specific interest group affiliations.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	
			<i>ln(Sectional Interest Groups)</i>				
Beauty	-0.380*	-0.340	-0.076	-0.435	-0.680**	-0.286	
	[0.218]	[0.220]	[0.149]	[0.330]	[0.317]	[0.229]	
Beauty * Left				-1.043***	-0.996***	0.371	
				[0.191]	[0.238]	[0.310]	
Beauty * Right				-0.106	-0.486*	0.553	
				[0.261]	[0.291]	[0.746]	
Left			-1.192***	0.191	0.390	-1.234**	
			[0.219]	[0.415]	[0.370]	[0.202]	
Right			-0.056	0.429	1.204	-0.173	
			[0.178]	[0.860]	[1.111]	[0.168]	
Perceived Competence			1.106***			0.855**	
			[0.320]			[0.343]	
Perceived Trustworthiness			-1.132**			-1.040*	
			[0.428]			[0.393]	
Female			0.324			0.142	
			[0.307]			[0.304]	
Age			0.196***			0.209**	
			[0.070]			[0.070]	
Age sq.			-0.002**			-0.002*	
			[0.001]			[0.001]	
Children Dummy			-0.457*			-0.400	
			[0.255]			[0.240]	
Married			-0.354*			-0.374*	
			[0.189]			[0.191]	
Army Officer			-0.029			-0.011	
			[0.197]			[0.195]	
Postgraduate degree			0.317**			0.263*	
			[0.125]			[0.139]	
Time in Parliament			0.070***			0.070**	
			[0.023]			[0.024]	
Time in Parliament sq.			-0.003**			-0.003**	
			[0.001]			[0.001]	
Chamber Changer			-0.139			-0.037	
			[0.250]			[0.252]	
Political Competitors			-0.067**			-0.060*	
			[0.033]			[0.031]	
Margin of Victory			-0.009***			-0.010**	
			[0.003]			[0.003]	
Silent Vote			0.427			0.487	
			[0.313]			[0.323]	
Observations	326	326	326	326	326	326	
R-squared	0.043	0.457	0.758	0.319	0.574	0.762	
Year FE	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	
Canton FE	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	

Notes. DV =  $\ln(\text{Interest groups}+1)$ . FE: Fixed Effects. Standard errors clustered at politician level in brackets.

All specifications include a constant. \*\*\*, \*\* and \* denote significance at the 1, 5 and 10% levels respectively.

### 4.2.3 Beauty and Voter Congruence

The results for politician-voter congruence are presented in Table 5. In general, we observe a weak negative relationship between beauty and political congruence for the average politician (cols. 1-3), meaning that politicians with higher beauty ratings are somewhat less likely to be

congruent with their constituents, partially corresponding to the view that politicians have some leeway to exploit the beauty premium by diverting from their constituents' preferences. However, the coefficients are statistically significant only at a 10% level (e.g., 95% CI with full controls: -11.6 percent to +0.04 percent). Benchmarking the coefficient of beauty to that of other variables (Online Appendix Figure C1) reveals that beauty has a similar magnitude to age and education, and beauty's effect is not larger (in absolute value) than any of the other variables included in the model). Thus, the effect of beauty in accentuating the principal-agent problem, by providing good-looking politicians with opportunities to disregard their constituents' preferences, is modest at best.

When exploring heterogeneity along party lines, we do not find evidence that beauty matters differentially for representatives of Centre or Left-leaning parties. Only when controlling for politician and electoral characteristics, do we observe that more beautiful Right-leaning politicians seem less likely to deviate from their constituents, compared to their Centre counterparts. Nevertheless, the average marginal effect of beauty for Right-wing politicians is only weakly significant at 10% level (95% CI: -1.8 percent - +23 percent). Overall, we interpret the results in Table 5 as showing no evidence that more beautiful politicians represent their constituents' preferences any worse than less beautiful politicians.

**Table 5.** Beauty and voter congruence.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
			<i>Voter Congruence</i>			
Beauty	-0.003 [0.015]	-0.024* [0.014]	-0.058* [0.029]	-0.012 [0.012]	-0.031 [0.027]	-0.059 [0.041]
Beauty * Left				0.021 [0.032]	0.006 [0.033]	-0.027 [0.049]
Beauty * Right				0.041 [0.093]	0.074 [0.089]	0.165** [0.073]
Left			-0.028 [0.036]	-0.043* [0.023]	-0.035 [0.025]	-0.039 [0.038]
Right			-0.032 [0.024]	-0.035 [0.029]	-0.007 [0.032]	-0.041* [0.024]
Perceived Competence			0.001 [0.051]			0.032 [0.062]
Perceived Honesty			0.056 [0.064]			0.028 [0.066]
Female			-0.028 [0.053]			-0.013 [0.064]
Age			-0.003 [0.013]			-0.003 [0.014]
Age sq.			-0.000 [0.000]			-0.000 [0.000]
Children Dummy			0.056 [0.042]			0.075* [0.039]
Married			-0.007 [0.035]			-0.007 [0.036]
Army Officer			-0.003 [0.034]			-0.023 [0.034]
Postgraduate degree			-0.021 [0.024]			-0.020 [0.026]
Time in Parliament			0.000 [0.004]			0.001 [0.004]
Time in Parliament sq.			0.000 [0.000]			0.000 [0.000]
Chamber Changer			-0.038 [0.041]			-0.044 [0.039]
Political Competitors			0.008 [0.011]			0.008 [0.012]
Margin of Victory			0.000 [0.001]			0.000 [0.001]
Silent Vote			0.033 [0.073]			0.029 [0.072]
Observations	2,049	2,049	2,049	2,049	2,049	2,049
R-squared	0.000	0.306	0.309	0.002	0.306	0.310
Canton FE	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Referendum FE	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

*Notes.* Linear probability models. DV = Pr(Politician vote on referendum matches constituent votes). FE: Fixed Effects. Standard errors clustered at politician level in brackets. All specifications include a constant. \*\*\*, \*\* and \* denote significance at the 1, 5 and 10% levels respectively.

## 5 Limitations and Concluding Remarks

According to the literature, beauty matters in elections. However, there is currently limited research linking politicians' physical characteristics to their actual behaviour, which we address in this paper. Politics suffers greatly from the principal-agent problem due to the (typically) unobservable nature of many aspects of the political process. For example, the typical citizen would likely admit they do not know what politicians do on a day-to-day basis, or the political process functions in general. In cases where information asymmetries are quite large (e.g., as in credence good markets), this degree of uncertainty about the quality of different political candidates raises questions regarding which cues are reliable. Further, do these beauty cues actually drive the behaviour of politicians, or do the perceptions of others simply work to bridge the information divide?

We look at actual, elected Swiss politicians (i.e., with high external validity) and show that beauty, on average, does not lead to more interest group affiliations (e.g., corporate lobbying groups) and thus, potential side incomes for elected politicians. This contrasts with the broader beauty premium literature that suggests more physically attractive individuals should achieve greater labour market outcomes. We find that beauty is, if anything, only weakly negatively associated with political congruence (i.e., how well politicians represent their constituents). Thus, beauty is unlikely to influence elected politicians' decisions to defect from constituents' preferences.

Overall, we interpret our results as suggestive evidence that the 'beauty premium' is highly context-dependent in politics. At least for already-elected politicians, when looking at actual political behaviour post-election, the relevance of beauty is negligible. In other words, once in office, beauty does not matter anymore and does not drive the behaviour of politicians towards more (or less) socially desirable outcomes. This is an important qualification to the large literature on beauty premia in professional settings. This further illustrates the point that citizens' preference for beauty could largely drive the beauty premium observed in the literature, while the behaviour of politicians is not or hardly affected. Further, that such beauty-based heuristics may not actually serve us in achieving more socially desirable outcomes in the political sphere (e.g., better representation of constituents' needs, wants, and policy viewpoints).

Our findings here need to be qualified in light of the highly transparent setting of Swiss politics (i.e., the socio-political context). In other words, it could be the openness of Swiss politics (in terms of the freely available, verifiable evidence of politicians' voting on referenda



and initiatives, and interest group affiliations) and higher engagement of citizens in the political process (direct democracy) that discourages divergence from constituents' expectations in general. A key question, which cannot be answered in the present setting, is: what happens in an environment that is less transparent on how politicians behave? Importantly, our results do not depend on political competition, i.e., the relatively weak link between beauty and actual behaviour is independent of controls for political competition, suggesting some generalisability of our results.

Because context matters, there are a lot of other high frequency measurements and potential interaction effects (e.g., politicians' collaboration in committees, connection with citizens/community, how politicians communicate their work during times of stability vs instability) that we do not explore in this current study, but that could be salient for mapping beauty effects in the political process. However, in saying this, our measure of political congruence is a powerful behavioural measure/proxy as it allows to compare what the politician promised to do with what they actually do. This follow-through on commitments matters very much to political survival. However, in the current study we only ask people at a particular point in time what are the inferred traits of Swiss politicians, rather than looking at how these perceptions may evolve over time.

Whilst facial cues readily provide a wealth of social information (Kozlov et al. 2018; Bahamonde & Sarpila, 2023), information can also be inferred from body shapes (Hu et al., 2018), a factor we did not consider in the current study. For example, attributes such as physical strength, fitness, and fertility can be easily inferred from the shape and size of a target's body. However, research in the dating market shows the relative importance placed on a 'pretty face' (as opposed to 'hot bod') when considering longer-term partnerships (Currie & Little, 2009; Confer et al., 2010; Jonason et al., 2012). This suggests that longer-term interactions require a different mindset. Given that Swiss politicians serve terms of 4 years after being elected into office (with no term limits, contingent on being voted back in), it is likely that faces would be more important signalling devices than bodies. However, there is a lack of research on this topic. Thus, there remains scope for future work to address this research question.

Recently, scholars have turned their focus to documenting the situations under which beauty does not pay or even penalises (Wilson & Eckel, 2006; Andreoni & Petrie, 2008; Deryugina & Shurchkov, 2015; Li et al., 2021), or which reward ugliness (Mocan & Tekin, 2010). This is an important shift of focus in the literature, but one which still leaves plenty of scope for future research in mapping the landscape of mechanisms under which beauty premia (or penalties) operate and emerge. Under which conditions, emotions, and domains can

admiration for beautiful people switch to envy or frustration? Such questions, which we leave open for future research, could also shed light on wide-spread human phenomena like superstardom and cancel culture, particularly relevant in our modern, digital, highly connected world.

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