

# Who benefits from perceived masculinity? A visual survey experiment

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## Introduction

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## Motivation

### Opinions

# Barack Obama, the first female president



Opinion by **Dana Milbank**  
Columnist  
May 14, 2012

The current issue of [Newsweek](#) has a photo of President Obama with a rainbow-colored halo superimposed over his head and the title “The First Gay President.”

Nonsense. Obama is not the first gay president. He is the first female president.

Source: The Washington Post

## Background

- Stereotypical male or white traits are often linked to a leader's success and popularity (Eagly & Karau 2002, Gundemir et al. 2014, Rosette et al. 2008, Lombard et al 2021).
- Gendered political socialization theory (Bos et al. 2022)
  - Sex disparities arise because children learn that politics is male-dominated and masculine (Cassese et al. 2014).
- Prejudices may disproportionately harm women, ethnic minorities and other disadvantaged groups (Dasgupta & Asgari 2004).

## Background

Voters may use facial characteristics as a cognitive shortcut to evaluate a candidate (Johns & Shephard 2007, Lawson et al. 2010, Brusattin 2012; Chiao et al. 2008; Todorov et al. 2013).

The proliferation of visual representations of political candidates has increased voter exposure to depictions of candidates in various media channels:

- televised advertisements (Sapiro et al. 2011; Bauer & Santia 2021)
- debates (Boussalis et al. 2021, Bernhard N.d)
- social media platforms (Boussalis et al. N.d.; Vecchiato & Munger, 2021)
- official campaign websites (Druckman et al. 2007)

## Facial Masculinity

Facial masculinity is a prominent aspect among the many factors that impact voters assessment of politicians (Carpinella & Johnson 2016).

- “Facial masculinity” refers to stereotypically masculine facial features.
- It is physiologically driven by sex:
  - Elevated testosterone levels are associated with masculine facial traits such a stronger jaw and brow and narrower eyes (Pound et al 2009) and dominance, risk- taking, and status-seeking (Spisak et al. 2012).
  - Oestrogen, on the other hand, is associated with feminine facial traits, giving women wider eyes and fuller lips and makes them more caring and kind (Taylor et al. 2000; Thornhill & Møller 1997).
- Political candidates with masculine facial features and behaviour are more likely to be seen as competent leaders and win elections (Cooper 2009; Carpinella Johnson 2016, Bauer 2017) (also see Carpinella et al. (2016) and Bernhard (2022) for heterogeneous effects).

## Question

To what extent does higher facial masculinity improve a candidate's chance of being elected, and how does the impact vary based on the candidate's race and gender?

## Research Design

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## Visuals in Conjoint Experiments

A conventional conjoint analysis presents participants with a collection of randomly generated candidate profiles that include a list of attributes. They are then asked to choose or rank their favourite selections depending on their own preferences.

However, this is suboptimal for reflecting the contemporary interaction of politicians with voters, which is based on visual cues.

The use of visuals are becoming recently important in candidate choice experiments (Abrajano et al. 2018, Vecchiato & Munger 2021, Bernhaard N.d.).

## Design

- Pre-registered online experiment, February 2023
- Three attributes:
  - Level of Facial Masculinity: (i) High facial masculinity, (ii) Low facial masculinity
  - Gender: (i) Woman, (ii) Man
  - Race: (i) Caucasian, (ii) African American
- 3 choice tasks: choose between 2 visually presented candidate profiles
- 1014 US citizens are recruited through Cloud Research Connect Platform.

## Experimental Stimuli

Photorealistic candidates are generated by MetaHumans platform. A user-friendly tool that enables the manipulation of various facial features.

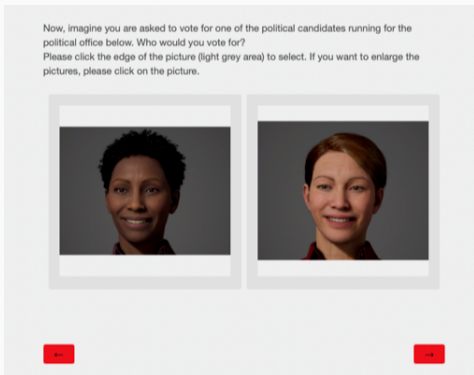
The process of masculinizing both male and female faces was carried out in five stages, as outlined in Mitteroecker et al. (2015):

- increasing the width of the face by augmenting the inter-orbital distance
- widening the nasal region
- reducing the fullness of the lips
- augmenting the lower facial region, specifically the lower jaw area
- decreasing the size of the eyes.

The profiles which passed the validation test only used in the experiment.

## Screenshot of a choice task

Now, imagine you are asked to vote for one of the political candidates running for the political office below. Who would you vote for?  
Please click the edge of the picture (light grey area) to select. If you want to enlarge the pictures, please click on the picture.

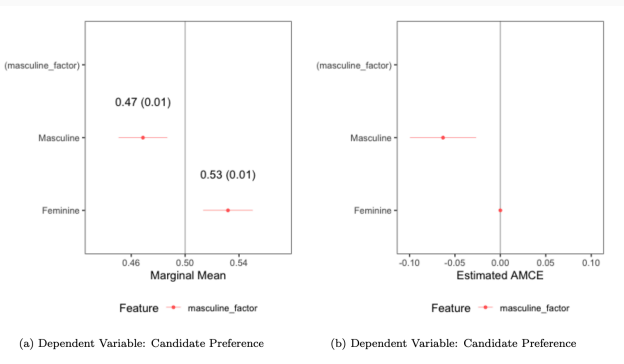


The screenshot displays a choice task interface. At the top, there is a text prompt: "Now, imagine you are asked to vote for one of the political candidates running for the political office below. Who would you vote for? Please click the edge of the picture (light grey area) to select. If you want to enlarge the pictures, please click on the picture." Below the text are two square images of political candidates, each enclosed in a light grey border. The left image shows a woman with dark skin and short, curly black hair. The right image shows a woman with light skin and short, reddish-brown hair. At the bottom of the interface, there are two red buttons with white arrows: a left-pointing arrow on the left and a right-pointing arrow on the right.

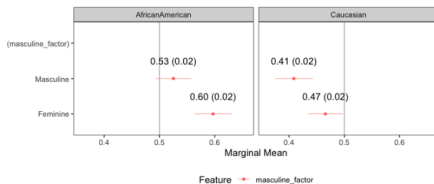
## Results

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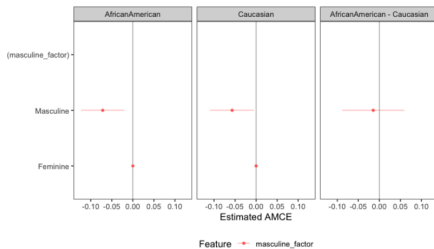
# Results



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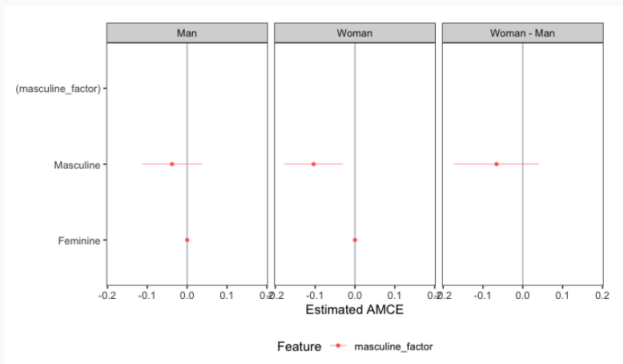


(a) Dependent Variable: Candidate Preference



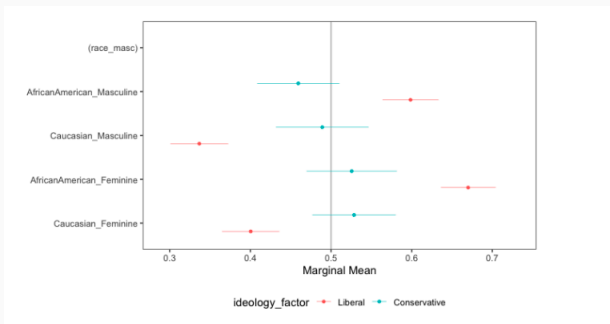
(b) Dependent Variable: Candidate Preference

## Results (only African American candidates)





## Results (by participants' ideology)



## Conclusion

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## Conclusion

- Reduced levels of facial masculinity can have a significantly positive effect on how voters perceive political candidates.
- African American women candidates may benefit from facial characteristics that are less masculine, particularly among liberal voters.

THANK YOU FOR LISTENING.