

Who Cares What They Wear? Media, Gender, and the Influence of Candidate Appearance*

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Objectives. This article seeks to determine whether candidate appearance influences election outcomes, and if so, whether the effect depends on the politician's sex. For all of the scholarly attention these questions have received in recent years, the way that media coverage of candidate appearance shapes voters' evaluations remains unclear.

Methods. We report the results of an experiment designed to shed light on these questions. We exposed a national sample of subjects to news coverage of candidates for a seat in the U.S. Congress. We varied whether the candidate was a man or a woman, and whether the candidate's appearance was covered positively, negatively, neutrally, or not mentioned at all. *Results.* Our analysis reveals that only negative appearance coverage has an effect, driving down evaluations by lowering voters' assessments of candidates' professionalism. Critically, though, the effect is identical for male and female candidates. Regardless of whether we examine overall candidate favorability, assessments of traits, or perceptions of issue-handling ability, female politicians do not pay a disproportionate price when the media focus on how they look. *Conclusions.* Ultimately, even though candidate sex and physical appearance can matter to voters, these factors are unlikely to displace incumbency, partisanship, and ideology as principal drivers of election outcomes.

Does candidate appearance influence election outcomes? And if so, does the effect depend on whether the politician is a man or a woman? Not only have these questions garnered significant scholarly attention in recent years, but they have also arguably taken on greater importance in the lead-up to the 2016 presidential race. The potential candidacies of former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie have led to a spate of news stories about their physical appearance. Major newspaper headlines calling

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attention to Clinton's age and Christie's size have renewed debates about the influence of this type of media coverage on voters' assessments of candidates.¹

For all the attention to these questions, however, much remains unknown. Little research has examined whether negative media portrayals of a candidate's appearance exert a stronger influence on voters' impressions than do flattering descriptions, as existing theory would predict. And though a large literature suggests that female candidates may be at particular risk when the news emphasizes how they look or what they wear, an emerging body of work offers reasons to suspect that women may not suffer more than their male counterparts. As a result, the way that media coverage of candidate appearance shapes voters' evaluations is unclear.

We build on the existing research by reporting the results of an experiment designed to shed light on these questions. We exposed a national sample of subjects to news coverage of candidates for a seat in the U.S. Congress. We varied whether the candidate was a man or a woman, and whether the candidate's appearance was covered positively, negatively, neutrally, or not mentioned at all. Our analysis reveals that only negative appearance coverage has an effect, driving down evaluations by lowering voters' assessments of candidates' professionalism. Critically, though, the effect is identical for male and female candidates. Regardless of whether we examine overall candidate favorability, assessments of traits, or perceptions of issue-handling ability, female politicians do not pay a disproportionate price when the media focus on their hair or hemlines. Our results suggest that candidates' visual appearance, such as their attire, is most likely to matter when it draws negative attention from the news media. But given the norms and practices of contemporary journalism, such coverage is likely to be rare. Ultimately, even though candidate sex and physical appearance can matter to voters, these factors are unlikely to displace incumbency, partisanship, and ideology as principal drivers of election outcomes, especially in low-information contests.

Candidate Appearance, Gender Stereotypes, and Voter Evaluations

As troubling as it might be to democratic theorists, there is little empirical doubt that seemingly superficial considerations can affect voters' choices. Because most people are relatively inattentive to politics and rely on simple information shortcuts to make political judgments (Lau and Redlawsk, 2001; Popkin, 1994), candidates' physical appearance can shape the way that citizens evaluate them. Voters who see attractive images of candidates assess them more favorably than those exposed to unflattering visuals (e.g., Barrett and

¹See, for example, the following *New York Times* headlines from spring 2013: "Republicans Paint Clinton as Old News for 2016 Presidential Election." Available at (<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/30/us/politics/republicans-paint-clinton-as-old-news-for-2016-presidential-election.html?pagewanted=all>) (January 28, 2014); and "Weight Led Governor to Surgery." Available at (<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/08/nyregion/christie-secretly-had-weight-loss-surgery.html>) (January 28, 2014).

Barrington, 2005; Rosenberg et al., 1986; Rosenberg, Kahn, and Tran, 1991; Sigelman, Sigelman, and Fowler, 1987). Politicians' nonverbal facial displays can also influence voters' emotional responses, and ultimately their level of support for candidates (Sullivan and Masters, 1988; Masters and Sullivan, 1989). And a recent, much-publicized body of work has found that citizens appear to make nearly automatic inferences about politicians' traits, such as their apparent competence, based simply on their facial appearance. These evaluations, furthermore, strongly predict candidate support and actual election outcomes (Lenz and Lawson, 2011; Lawson et al., 2010; Mattes et al., 2010; Todorov et al., 2005). In short, candidates who look better do better.

There are reasons to believe, however, that the effect of candidate appearance depends on the information environment voters navigate. This may be true on at least two dimensions. First, a number of studies suggest that a candidate's personal attributes, including visual appearance, should be most influential when those characteristics are emphasized by the media (Hart, 1999; Druckman, 2003, 2004; Hayes, 2009; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Keeter, 1987; Mendelsohn, 1994). In such situations, a candidate's image may become more salient and exert a greater influence on voters' evaluations. For instance, Lenz and Lawson (2011) find that candidate appearance has its strongest effects on citizens who know little about politics but watch a lot of television. Second, a large literature in psychology demonstrates that, all else equal, negative information is more memorable and influential than positive information (e.g., Ito et al., 1998; Kanouse and Hanson, 1972). Negative information consequently has a disproportionate effect on citizens' political judgments (Kernell, 1977; Lau, 1982, 1985; Meffert et al., 2006). Candidate appearance should thus play its strongest role when candidates are portrayed in unflattering ways.

These prospects are not only important theoretically, but also because they speak directly to recent debates about media coverage of high-profile candidates. Much of the attention to Clinton's age and Christie's struggles with his weight, for example, has focused on the negative aspects of their physical attributes, and whether these would hurt their chances with voters.² Yet little work has examined empirically whether negative media portrayals of candidate appearance are indeed more powerful than positive ones. Since the vast majority of information that voters receive about candidates comes from selective media accounts of campaigns, this is an important gap in our understanding of how news reporting can shape political impressions.

Research in this vein can also shed light on the extent to which the consequences of candidate appearance are gendered. The women and politics literature, after all, offers competing expectations on this front. On

²Julian Zelizer, "Chris Christie's Weight: Why it Matters," *CNN.com*, May 13, 2103. Available at (<http://www.cnn.com/2013/05/13/opinion/zelizer-chris-christie-weight>) (January 28, 2014); and Martha T. Moore, "Focus on Hillary Clinton's Appearance Sparks Criticism," *USA Today*, May 10, 2012. Available at (<http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/washington/story/2012--05--09/hillary-rodham-clinton/54860282/1>) (January 28, 2014).

one hand, some research suggests that appearance coverage may prove disproportionately harmful to female candidates. Studies of gender stereotyping have found that citizens evaluate male and female candidates differently. Female politicians, for instance, are generally viewed as more liberal, compassionate, and empathetic than their male counterparts, and better able to handle social welfare issues, such as gender equity, healthcare, education, and poverty. Voters tend to assess men as more assertive, competent, self-confident, and stronger leaders, as well as more capable of dealing with military crises, crime, and the economy (e.g., Alexander and Andersen, 1993; Dolan, 2010; Huddy and Terkildsen, 1993; Lawless, 2004; McDermott, 1997, 1998).

Coverage that draws attention to candidates' appearance, then, may activate these stereotypes, leading voters to assess candidates through a gendered lens. Because the traits and issue expertise attributed to male politicians are viewed as more important for politics (Falk and Kenski, 2006; Fox and Oxley, 2003; Kahn, 1996; Kittilson and Fridkin, 2008; Lawless, 2004), the prevailing wisdom is that women will suffer more than men when they garner appearance coverage (Miller and Peake, 2013). "Coverage of high-level female candidates has tended to focus upon their physical appearance, clothes, and personal life, otherwise known as the 'hair, husband, and hemline' problem," writes Duerst-Lahti (2006:37). "[This] focus . . . tends to diminish the credentials and accomplishments of female candidates." A widely reported study by the advocacy group "Name It. Change It." claims that any media coverage of a woman's appearance—even ostensibly flattering descriptions—will be harmful to her candidacy.³

On the other hand, recent developments suggest that female politicians may not suffer disproportionately from appearance-focused coverage. As the public has become increasingly receptive to—and familiar with—women in politics, gender differences in citizens' perceptions of women's and men's politically relevant traits and competencies have dissipated. These trends are evident in empirical research based on both observational and experimental data. Hayes and Lawless's (2013) analysis of the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, for example, reveals that partisanship and the information environment structure the way voters evaluate Democratic and Republican House candidates' leadership, empathy, trustworthiness, competence, and integrity, while the sex of the candidate does not. In her analysis of the 2010 U.S. House races that involved both male and female candidates, Dolan (2014) uncovers no evidence that voters hold traditional gender stereotypes and factor them into their voting decisions. Hayes (2011) draws a similar conclusion in a study of the 2006 U.S. Senate contests. And Brooks (2013) finds—based on a series of experiments—that women who act tough, get angry, or even cry on the campaign trail are not viewed any differently than are men who do the same thing.

³Name It. Change It. "Complete Appearance Survey." Available at (<http://www.nameitchangeit.org/pages/4824>) (January 31, 2014).

Taken together, the recent literatures on candidate appearance and gender stereotyping suggest that voters may rely on superficial criteria when evaluating candidates, but that candidate sex may not be a particularly salient cue in the current political environment. Our synthesis of the extant research thus leads to two expectations: (1) negative news coverage of how candidates look will drive down citizens' evaluations of those candidates, but (2) male and female candidates will pay a similar price for these negative portrayals.

Experimental Design

We test these hypotheses using an experiment we conducted in May 2013 through Mechanical Turk (MTurk). This service provides people with small payments (in our case \$1) for participating in academic surveys or market research.⁴ The experiment exposed our 961 adult subjects to newspaper articles about two hypothetical congressional candidates we created: Susan Williams and Michael Stevenson. We wrote eight versions of what looked like a typical newspaper article summarizing the candidate's support for an education bill. The story was also designed to communicate some basic background and biographical information about the candidate. The stories were identical except that we varied the sex of the candidate and a description of how he or she was dressed. We wrote the articles to resemble local newspaper coverage of a typical congressional campaign event, and only at the end of the experiment were subjects told that the stories had been fabricated. (See the Appendix, available online, for a description of the sample and the text of the articles.⁵)

Our subjects initially completed a short survey and were then randomly assigned to read one of the eight newspaper articles.⁶ Two articles included no mention of the candidate's appearance. One simply described a press conference at which Susan Williams announced her support for the education bill. The other was the verbatim equivalent, but the candidate's name was Michael Stevenson. The other six articles included one additional clause that made either a neutral, positive, or negative reference to the candidate's clothing. Respondents who read one of the two neutral stories learned that the candidate was "dressed in a navy blue suit and red scarf" (Williams) or "navy blue suit and red tie" (Stevenson). The positive articles described the candidate as "looking fit and stylish in a classic navy blue suit and fashionable red scarf [tie]." And the negative articles portrayed the candidate as "looking disheveled and

⁴While methodological concerns about online experiments remain, Mechanical Turk samples are more demographically representative than are convenience samples of undergraduate students, which are typical for political science research (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz, 2012). Accordingly, MTurk has become a common method by which to conduct experiments in political science (e.g., Arceneaux, 2012; Huber and Paris, 2013). For more information on Mechanical Turk, see: (<https://www.mturk.com/mturk/welcome>).

⁵Information about the demographics of the sample, as well as the news articles subjects read, are available at: (<http://home.gwu.edu/~dwh/>).

⁶Each condition contained between 101 and 134 respondents.

sloppy in an ill-fitting navy blue suit and tattered red scarf [tie].” After reading the article, respondents were asked to rate—on a scale from 0 to 10—how favorably they viewed the candidate, and to evaluate the candidate in terms of several politically relevant traits, as well as on the ability to handle a series of issues. By examining whether respondents exposed to different combinations of candidate sex and news content form different impressions, we can identify whether and how appearance coverage shapes voters’ evaluations.

Descriptions of clothing are, of course, not the only way that candidate appearance could become relevant to voters. News accounts could also call attention to other physical attributes, such as a candidate’s height, weight, makeup, or simply how attractive she or he is. We are not suggesting that descriptions of clothing are the only, or even the most important, aspect of candidate appearance that could matter to voters. But we designed our treatments to reflect specific examples of recent news coverage of politicians’ appearance on the campaign trail, including a *Washington Post* story about Representative Paul Ryan’s “rumpled, slightly sloppy” clothing, and a *U.S. News and World Report* article about Representative Michele Bachmann’s “colorful polished suits.”⁷ In fact, our extensive reading of more than 4,000 news stories about the 2010 U.S. House elections suggests that our treatments reflect a common, and realistic, way that appearance makes its way into media coverage of even lower profile candidates’ congressional campaigns (Hayes and Lawless, 2013). Citizens reading the *Tampa Bay Times* learned, for example, that “perspiration collect[ed] on his polo shirt” as Charlie Justice canvassed a neighborhood in his attempt to unseat 20-term Congressman Bill Young.⁸ Representative Donna Edwards was described in the *Washington Post* as “stylish” as she discussed government bailouts, stimulus spending, and the recession.⁹ And in a columnist’s recap of a debate between the candidates in Washington’s fifth congressional district, Republican Cathy McMorris Rodgers’s “electric green sport coat” was juxtaposed against Democrat Daryl Romeyn’s “oversized and rumpled white shirt.”¹⁰

Our use of newspaper coverage may seem anachronistic in an age in which citizens have access to political information from a dizzying array of electronic

⁷Katherine Boyle, “Ryan and Romney: A Contrast in Sartorial Styles,” *Washington Post*, August 14, 2012. Available at (http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012--08-14/lifestyle/35490691_1_ryan-and-romney-mitt-romney-paul-ryan) (January 31, 2014); and Paul Bedard, “Bachmann Amps Up Her Fashion Flair,” *U.S. News and World Report*, June 21, 2011. Available at (<http://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/washington-whispers/2011/06/21/bachmann-amps-up-her-fashion-flair>) (January 28, 2014).

⁸David DeCamp, “Justice Labors for Votes as Young Ignores the Underdog,” *Tampa Bay Times*, October 3, 2010. Available at (<http://www.tampabay.com/news/politics/local/justice-labors-for-votes-as-young-ignores-the-underdog/1125753>) (January 28, 2014).

⁹Robert McCartney, “House Democrats Moran, Edwards Ponder What Went Wrong for Their Party,” *Washington Post*, October 23, 2010. Available at (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/23/AR2010102304005.html>) (January 28, 2014).

¹⁰Doug Clark, “Debate Ends with Texas Up Three Games,” *The Spokesman-Review*, October 21, 2010. Available at (<http://www.spokesman.com/stories/2010/oct/21/debate-ends-with-texas-up-3-games>) (January 28, 2014).

and social media venues, but we designed the experiment this way for three reasons. First, our design is consistent with the way voters most often encounter information about candidate appearance in congressional and other low-salience elections. The vast majority of the information available to voters during congressional campaigns still comes from local print media (Graber, 2010; Vinson, 2003). This is not to diminish the importance of other outlets, such as national newspapers, cable television, blogs, and social media. But there is very little coverage of individual congressional campaigns in national outlets such as Fox News and the *New York Times*, and the audiences for political information in many newer venues remain very small. Of course, there is no reason that our findings could not be applied to or replicated in other venues, such as blogs or social media. In our design, newspaper coverage is simply a vehicle for delivering information to experimental subjects, and there are many possibilities for extending our approach beyond traditional media.

Second, although news organizations do occasionally publish photographs or air footage of politicians, much of what voters learn about congressional candidates' appearance comes from the way reporters describe them. And there is often more variation in those written descriptions than what readers might glean from a photograph. For instance, a May 2013 *Washington Post* profile of Massachusetts U.S. Senate candidate Gabriel Gomez carried just one photo (of Gomez pointing at supporters at a rally). But his "central-casting" appearance was described at multiple points in the story, including as a "strong-jawed Republican running as a fresh face" who is "known to don a green bomber jacket" and is "strapping" enough to be the cover model of a "Republican romance novel."¹¹ Accordingly, we diverge from much of the literature that focuses on appearance by testing for the effects of what voters read about candidates, not what they see. Visual images are clearly important to voters' assessments (e.g., Todorov et al., 2005), but our design has the benefit of testing whether appearance effects may also stem from written descriptions as they appear in the news.

Third, because we are interested in whether the impact of appearance coverage differs for male and female candidates, our approach makes it easier to isolate any effect. If we relied on visual images, then we would be forced to use candidate photos—one male and one female. Doing so, however, would create variation not only in the sex of the candidate to whom the subjects would be exposed, but also in particular physical features, which naturally differ between men and women. By using print descriptions, we need only change the name of the candidate, which does not introduce variation in the candidates' appearance beyond our purposeful manipulations of news coverage.

¹¹Jason Horowitz, "Gabriel Gomez: GOP Hope in Massachusetts," *Washington Post*, May 9, 2013. Available at (http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/gabriel-gomez-gop-hope-in-massachusetts/2013/05/09/e3132162-b8d9--11e2-aa9e-a02b765ff0ea_story.html) (January 31, 2014).

In short, our research design allows us to examine the prevalence and effects—gendered and otherwise—of appearance coverage in a way that captures quite realistically how citizens encounter information about congressional candidates. In addition, because much of the literature regarding gender differences in media coverage also focuses on print media, our approach facilitates the ability to draw comparisons between our findings and those uncovered in previous research.

Results

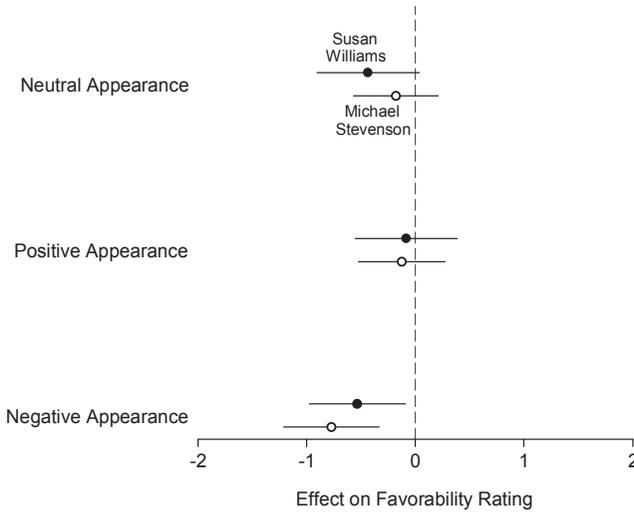
We begin with a comparison of overall candidate evaluations across the eight experimental conditions. As soon as they completed reading a newspaper article about the candidate, subjects were asked the following question: “How favorable is your impression of Susan Williams [Michael Stevenson]? On a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 representing very unfavorable and 10 representing very favorable, how would you rate Susan Williams [Michael Stevenson]?” Subjects assigned to the conditions that included no mention of Williams’s or Stevenson’s appearance rated the candidates favorably; Williams received a mean rating of 7.85, and Stevenson 7.68. These baseline scores are important because the difference between them is not statistically significant. Without any mention of the candidates’ appearance, subjects assigned to read an article about Williams and those assigned to read a piece about Stevenson evaluated the candidate to whom they were exposed similarly.

Given these baseline ratings, we can examine the effects of positive, neutral, and negative appearance coverage on candidate evaluations. Figure 1 plots the difference in mean favorability for each candidate between subjects in each treatment and the baseline (No Appearance) condition. Positive numbers indicate that the rating was higher in the appearance coverage treatment than in the No Appearance condition; negative numbers indicate the opposite. The point estimates are mean differences, and the lines represent 95 percent confidence intervals.

The data presented in Figure 1 provide clear support for our hypotheses. Foremost, both candidates paid a price for negative appearance coverage. Respondents rated Williams and Stevenson less favorably when they were described as “disheveled and sloppy” and wearing “ill-fitting” and “tattered” clothes. Neutral and positive appearance mentions, however, did not exert an effect. The difference in candidate ratings among respondents who were exposed to descriptions of Williams and Stevenson as “fit” and “stylish,” compared to those who read nothing about how they looked, was not statistically significant. The same is true for neutral descriptions of the candidates’ attire. Our results indicate that appearance coverage is one more realm in which

FIGURE 1

The Effect of Appearance Coverage on Candidate Favorability, by Candidate Sex



NOTE: Figure shows the difference in favorability rating between each treatment and the No Appearance condition. Positive numbers indicate that the rating was higher in the appearance coverage treatment. The point estimates are mean differences, and the lines are 95 percent confidence intervals.

negative information influences voters' judgments more than positive information does.¹²

Although negative appearance coverage can drive down candidate favorability ratings, the data also make clear that candidate sex has no bearing on voters' evaluations. When Williams and Stevenson are described similarly—whether in neutral, positive, or negative terms—their favorability ratings are indistinguishable from each other. Shifts in favorability from one type of appearance coverage to another are also no larger for Williams than for Stevenson—that is, the treatment effects do not differ by candidate sex. At least in terms of overall favorability, women do not pay a higher price than men for coverage of their appearance.¹³

¹²A manipulation check we included in the postexposure survey suggests one reason for this asymmetrical effect. We asked respondents to rate the favorability of the news story toward the candidate, on a scale from 0 to 10. Ratings in the No Appearance, Neutral, and Positive conditions were not statistically distinguishable from each other. But respondents in the Negative treatment rated the news story nearly two points less favorably ($p < .05$ compared to each of the other three conditions). This is consistent with research showing that negative information makes a stronger impression than positive information.

¹³The results presented in Figure 1 are the same when we examine vote likelihood. It is also important to note that the treatment effects are not contingent on respondent race, age, or sex. As far as party identification is concerned, in each condition, Democrats rate the female

We also asked respondents to indicate, on a scale from 0 to 10, how well a series of words and phrases describe the candidate about whom they read. A score of 0 means that the phrase does not describe the candidate well at all, and 10 means that the phrase describes the candidate very well. As with overall favorability, we uncovered no significant gender differences in candidate evaluations in the baseline condition. When subjects read an article about Williams or Stevenson that did not mention the candidate's appearance, they evaluated the candidates similarly on stereotypical male traits, such as leadership and competence, and female traits, such as empathy and integrity.

Unflattering coverage, however, hurts the candidates and drives down the extent to which they are perceived to possess politically relevant traits. The first two panels of Figure 2 present the difference in trait assessments between the Neutral and Positive Appearance treatments and the No Appearance condition; the third shows the difference between the Negative Appearance treatment and No Appearance condition. Once again, positive numbers indicate that the rating was higher in the appearance treatment, and negative numbers indicate that the rating was lower.¹⁴

The most striking finding to emerge from Figure 2 pertains to the effects of negative appearance coverage on assessments of candidates' professionalism (near the bottom of the third panel). Subjects who read stories that described Williams or Stevenson as sloppy and his/her attire ill-fitting penalized the candidate roughly two points on the 11-point scale. Neither neutral nor positive coverage generated comparable substantive effects.¹⁵

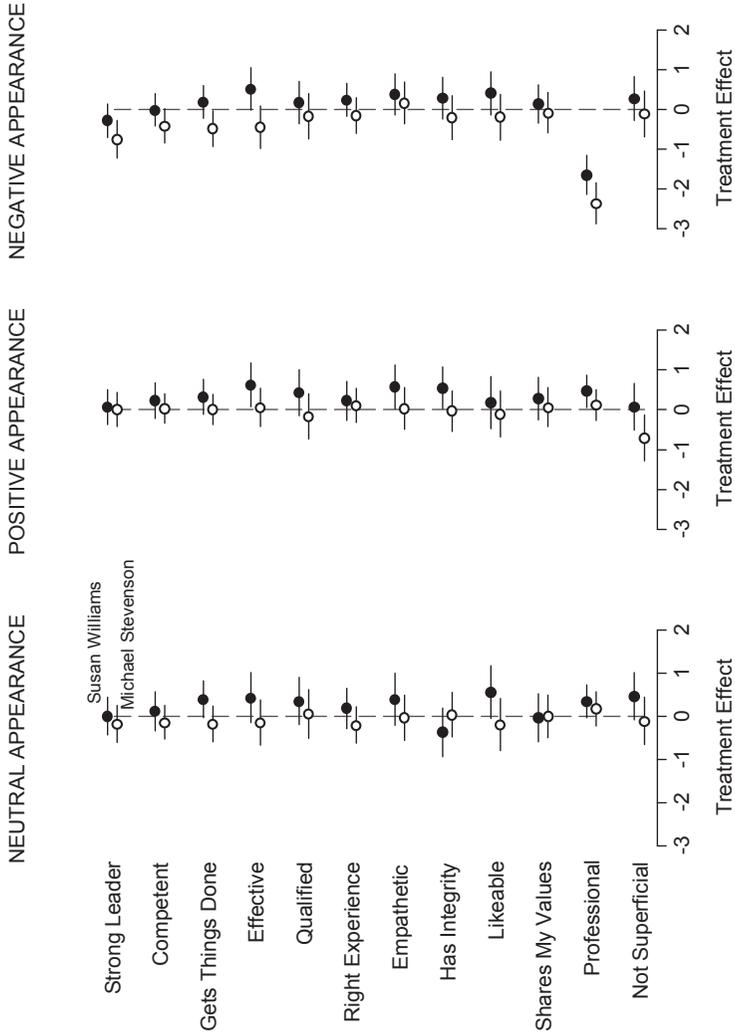
Importantly, though, the effects of the coverage are not gendered. Negative coverage, after all, lowered voters' assessments of both candidates' professionalism in equal measure. If anything, negative appearance coverage was a bigger problem for the male candidate. When Stevenson's appearance was described negatively, respondents rated him less favorably in terms of leadership, competence, and his ability to get things done. Williams paid no price on these additional dimensions. Williams also did not take a hit when her appearance was described in positive terms. She actually received slightly higher ratings on integrity, empathy, professionalism, and effectiveness than when her appearance was not mentioned at all. Stevenson received no such boost. Although we hesitate to make too much of these statistically significant gender differences

candidate more favorably than Republicans do, and Republicans rate the male candidate more favorably than Democrats do. But this is the case across treatments.

¹⁴The survey cast five of the traits in negative terms—ineffective, unqualified, lacks integrity, not likeable, and superficial. To ease interpretation of Figure 2, we recoded the responses so that higher ratings indicate more favorable evaluations and relabeled the traits to reflect positive attributes.

¹⁵These results suggest that our negative candidate appearance treatment is not simply capturing the effect of negative news coverage in general. If that was the case, then we would expect subjects to evaluate the candidate less favorably overall, as well as on the host of traits about which we asked. Yet the negative appearance mention only drives down assessments of professionalism and overall favorability (the latter of which results from questions about the candidate's professionalism). The dependent variables with the most obvious connections to appearance coverage are the only ones where we see effects.

FIGURE 2
The Effect of Appearance Coverage on Candidate Trait Evaluations, by Candidate Sex



NOTE: Each panel shows the difference in trait assessments between each treatment and the No Appearance condition. Positive numbers indicate that the rating was higher in the appearance treatment. The point estimates are mean differences, and the lines are 95 percent confidence intervals.

because they are so substantively small, it is clear—at the very least—that appearance coverage, and any gender stereotyping it might activate, does not work to the detriment of the female candidate.

Finally, we examine whether appearance coverage conveys signals about issue competence. We asked respondents how capable they thought the candidate would be of handling a series of issues (again on a scale of 0–10, where 0 means that the candidate would not handle the issue well at all, and 10 means that the candidate would handle the issue very well). Here, too, we uncovered no evidence of gender stereotyping in the No Appearance condition. Respondents assessed Williams and Stevenson as equally competent on the full range of issues about which we asked. From national security to the economy to crime to healthcare, the candidates were viewed as similarly capable.

Figure 3 presents the difference in issue-handling assessments between each of the appearance treatments and the No Appearance condition, in the same way we displayed the trait evaluations. Unlike the trait results, however, we find no relationship between appearance coverage and issue competence. The appearance effect seems limited to candidates' personal attributes, not their perceived facility in dealing with various policy areas. But just as with the previous analyses, we find no significant gender differences in any of the appearance conditions. On this dimension, too, then, respondents neither engage in gender stereotyping nor evaluate male and female candidates differently when exposed to positive, neutral, or negative mentions of their appearance.

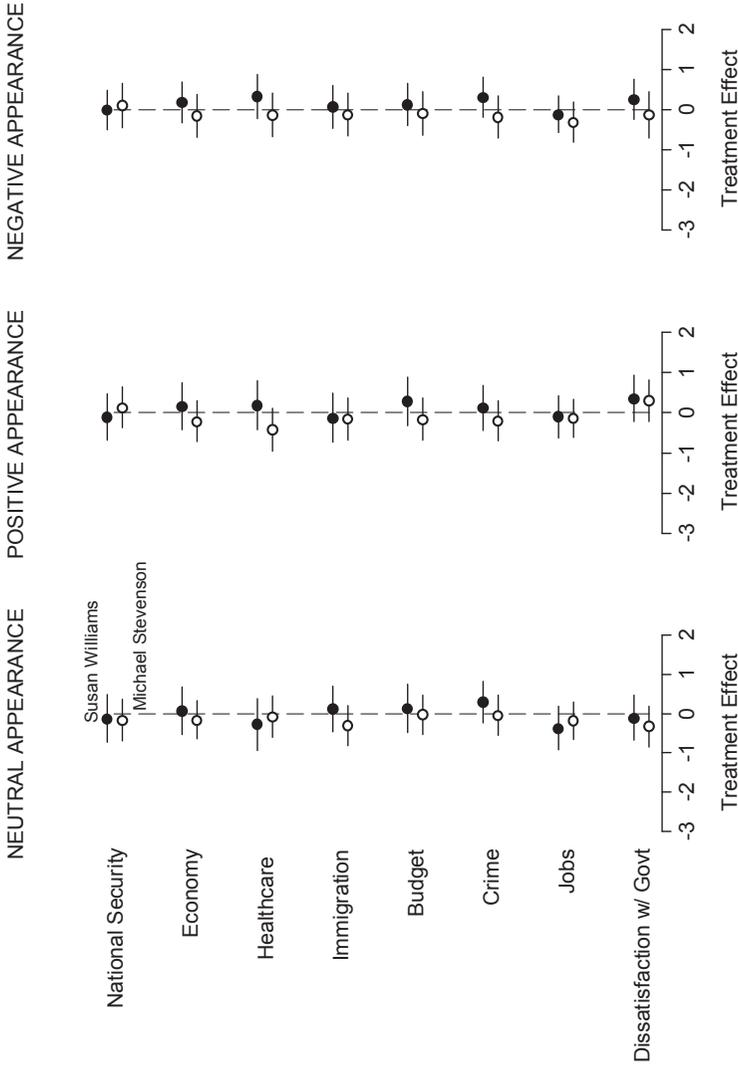
Taken together, the findings suggest that negative appearance coverage can drive down voters' evaluations of candidate favorability and professionalism. But women and men suffer equally when portrayed in an unflattering manner. Appearance coverage can be dangerous for candidates, but its effects do not appear to be disproportionately pernicious for women.

What If Women's Clothes Are More Newsworthy?

Of course, even if female candidates are not punished for negative appearance coverage any more than their male counterparts, they could still suffer disproportionately at the aggregate level if they are more likely than men to receive it. That is, the immediate effect of unflattering coverage might be similar for men and women, but such reporting could still pose a unique barrier to women if female candidates are especially likely to be covered in terms of how they look.

This appears to be a very real concern in light of research that has emphasized differences in the way the media cover male and female candidates. In a study of eight women who have run for president, Falk (2008) argues that press accounts overemphasized their appearance and sex, but underemphasized their issue positions. Other scholars have found that coverage of female presidential and vice presidential candidates tends to focus on nonsubstantive topics, including their appearance and personal story (e.g., Aday and Devitt, 2001;

FIGURE 3
The Effect of Appearance Coverage on Candidate Issue-Handling Assessments, by Candidate Sex



NOTE: Each panel shows the difference in issue-handling assessments between each appearance treatment and the No Appearance condition. Positive numbers indicate that the rating was higher in the appearance treatment. The point estimates are mean differences, and the lines are 95 percent confidence intervals. None of the treatment effects is statistically significant.

Heith, 2003; Heldman, Carroll, and Olson, 2005; Miller and Peake, 2013). A number of other studies highlight variation in the way the press treats male and female candidates (e.g., Dunaway et al., 2013; Smooth, 2006), although relatively few systematically measure the extent to which candidate appearance makes its way into the news.

The most recent research examining large numbers of electoral contests at multiple levels, however, indicates that the media landscape may no longer be so treacherous for women. Collectively, these studies suggest that female candidates are generally not more likely than male candidates to garner appearance coverage. In Hayes and Lawless's (2013) extensive content analysis of local newspaper coverage during the 2010 midterms, male and female candidates' physical appearance, style of dress, clothing, or hair and makeup received equal attention. Oxley's (2011) investigation of media coverage of state executive candidates in 2006 and 2008 turned up a similar pattern; the articles that mentioned a candidate's appearance were just as likely to describe a man as a woman. And Miller, Peake, and Boulton (2010) found that appearance coverage of Hillary Clinton in the 2008 presidential primary was no more common than that devoted to her male competitors. The one exception is Miller and Peake's (2013) finding that coverage of Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin in 2008 was more likely than Democratic nominee Joe Biden's to emphasize appearance. Even in this case, however, Palin's looks or clothing were mentioned in just 7 percent of the newspaper stories they coded, hardly enough to move public opinion in any meaningful measure.

These recent findings are consistent with broad understandings of the norms that shape the practice of mainstream journalism in the United States. While a candidate's appearance may become newsworthy in certain instances, news outlets are unlikely to devote excessive coverage to politicians' clothes or looks. Doing so risks violating professional and social expectations about what constitutes appropriate topics of coverage. This is not to say that stories about, say, the purses carried by female U.S. senators never make their way into the news.¹⁶ But while such articles draw considerable attention, they are often relegated to the style pages and constitute just a small fraction of the information that news organizations produce about politicians. Moreover, unequivocally negative coverage—the only type of reporting that produces effects in our experiment—is uncommon given the balance and “two-sidedness” that characterize mainstream news (Bennett, 2009; Cook, 2005). The combination of recent empirical research on media coverage of U.S. elections and the everyday practice of contemporary journalism thus suggests that appearance coverage is unlikely to pose a greater threat to female candidates than to their male opponents.

¹⁶Ashley Parker, “Purse Politics: Tote and Vote,” *New York Times*, May 31, 2013. Available at (<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/02/fashion/purse-politics-tote-and-vote.html>) (January 28, 2014).

Conclusion

Our findings provide new evidence about the way that superficial considerations can shape voting behavior and election outcomes in contemporary elections, especially races in which print media dominate the information environment. But in moving beyond the existing research, we show that appearance effects are likely to occur only when the news media portray candidates in unflattering ways. Furthermore, women do not appear to be at particular risk. Voters respond similarly to appearance coverage of female and male candidates.

To be sure, these dynamics deserve more scrutiny, and several avenues may prove fruitful. Foremost, further research could consider the extent to which our findings apply in different electoral contexts and through different media. Do televised portrayals of candidates or photographs that run alongside news stories have effects similar to or distinct from the ones we document? As an increasing proportion of voters come to rely on news websites and social media for political information, do these results hold in web-based settings, where visual imagery is more common? Are the effects conditional on the level of office the candidate is seeking? Our use of print coverage constitutes a realistic test of the appearance effect for congressional races, but more research may reveal whether unflattering footage or photographs of candidates produce the same patterns.

In terms of theory building in the gender and politics subfield, our results also provide clear direction. One key implication of our study is that a candidate's appearance is likely to matter only in limited circumstances, and those effects do not seem to vary for women and men. But before we dismiss gendered appearance effects altogether, we must recognize that gendered coverage throughout a campaign could activate voters' propensity to rely on gender stereotypes or exhibit gender bias (see Bauer, 2014). Accordingly, we should investigate whether repeated exposure to mentions of a candidate's appearance affects voters' evaluations, as well as whether gender-specific mentions of a candidate's appearance play a role. The extent to which campaign coverage reinforces visuals in campaign ads also warrants attention. And contrasting primaries with general elections might yield fruit, since primaries offer more opportunities for the media to describe and voters to evaluate candidates in nonpartisan, and perhaps gendered, terms.¹⁷

Still, in the end, our results indicate that the "fundamentals" of elections—partisanship, ideology, general assessments of the state of the country—are likely to remain the main determinants of voting behavior (Sides and Vavreck, 2013). This is not to say that appearance, gender, and media coverage do not

¹⁷The absence of partisanship in our design may exaggerate the effects of superficial considerations. But at the same time, the fact that we found no gender stereotyping in a nonpartisan environment seems to offer fairly strong evidence that candidate sex is not particularly important to voters. This is consistent with research that finds that female candidates fare at least as well as their male counterparts (e.g., Fox, 2010; Lawless and Pearson, 2008).

have a role to play in shaping the way that citizens understand politics and judge candidates. But the accumulated evidence, including our own, argues that when Americans go to the polls, they are far more likely to vote based on the candidates' party affiliations or ideological leanings than on the lines around their eyes or the size of their waistline.

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