

**The effects of candidate appearance on electoral success:  
Evidence from Ecuador**

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## **The effects of candidate appearance on electoral success: Evidence from Ecuador**

*Abstract: Research has shown that attractiveness can be an important factor for candidate success under many conditions. In this paper, we analyze the potential for voting environments to encourage voting based on appearance. We examine Ecuador's 2019 municipal elections, where voters faced complex candidate choices within a highly candidate-centered electoral system. The ballots in these elections provided photos of each candidate, which enhanced the potential for candidate appearance to act as a heuristic in a context of low-information decision-making. We find that candidate attractiveness has a positive effect on candidate evaluation and elections outcomes, particularly when candidates are placed in the most prominent section of the ballot. We find no substantial difference by candidate gender in the effect of attractiveness overall, although the effects are more consistent for female candidates when accounting for ballot location. Further analysis utilizing gender-separated polling stations shows that the effects are strongest for female voters.*

**Keywords:** attractiveness, personal vote, low-information voting, gender, ballot design.

## **Introduction**

An array of factors is known to influence voter decision-making, including candidate traits, ideological proximity to parties, stereotypes, and performance assessments, among others (Erisen and Blais 2016; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2018; Colantone and Stanig 2018; Crawford et al. 2011). Voter decision-making becomes especially complex when voters are faced with large amounts of candidates or parties on the ballot (Cohen 2018; Cunow et al. 2021) and especially under contexts of low voter information (Driscoll and Nelson 2014), which can be magnified in compulsory voting systems (Nagler 2015; Selb and Lachat 2009). Explanations for how people deal with this complexity have often focused on heuristics that can resolve the complexity of decision-making without acquiring large amounts of information yet still result in choices reflecting a voter's preferences in light of the available cues (Steenbergen et al. 2018).

In political systems with partisan elections, heuristics related to party labels are known greatly affect voting behavior (Schaffner and Streb 2002, Lau & Redlawsk 2001, Rahn 1993, Lim and Snyder 2015). In contexts where individual candidates are the focus of elections, important heuristics often include some aspect of candidate characteristics or quality (Atkeson and Hamel 2018). One candidate characteristic that has received a great deal of scholarly attention is physical appearance, which has been shown to affect evaluations of individuals in various circumstances, including political contexts (Agthe, Spörrle, and Maner 2010; Carpinella and Johnson 2016). Appearance serves as a cue that voters lacking other forms of information may use in their decision-making process. Physical appearance may have particular importance in otherwise low-information environments because an individual's outward appearance is one of the most obvious personal characteristics and one of the most accessible in social contexts (Berscheid and Walster 1974). In the context of elections, candidate appearance is made even more salient when pictures

of candidates appear directly on the ballot. While an attractiveness heuristic for candidates' character and personality may lead to arbitrary voting decisions, it may nevertheless be influential in contexts where photographic depictions of politicians are readily available and where voter information is sufficiently low.

While most work on this topic has dealt with advanced democracies, this study examines the case of a developing country with weakly institutionalized parties and an electoral context with high accessibility for candidate appearance and substantial complexity. In this paper, we use data from municipal elections in Quito, Ecuador, to examine the contexts that allow candidate appearance to play a role in voting behavior. First, based on the insights from the existing literature, we evaluate whether voters evaluate candidates that are more attractive more favorably. We also examine the conditions under which the effects of candidate appearance may vary. In particular, we examine whether the effect of attractiveness is influenced by the location of candidates on the ballot. We then explore whether the effects of appearance vary by the gender of the candidate. Finally, we examine if the effects of candidate appearance influence voting behavior differently for male and female voters, using the separated polling station data available in Ecuador.

In line with previous research, we find that attractiveness has a positive effect on candidate evaluation and election outcomes. We then examine the ballot location and show that the effect of attractiveness is strongest for candidates whose name and photo is located in the upper left quadrant of the ballot, which has been suggested as a visually prominent area. We also examine whether the gender of candidates is relevant to the effects of appearance and find that, overall, there is no significant difference between candidates in terms of gender. When we consider ballot location, however, we find that the electoral bonus for the attractiveness index is more consistent for female candidates. Finally, we also use the separation in polling stations by gender in Ecuador

to examine if the effects of candidate appearance differ, finding that effects are strongest for female voters.

Overall, we conclude that these findings are important evidence that superficial candidate qualities can become important to electoral outcomes in contexts with ballot photos, given high complexity and low information, which may be especially prevalent in countries with weakly institutionalized party systems, as seen in municipal elections in Ecuador.

### **Literature on Appearance and Ballot Affects**

Following a line of psychological research that indicates that people frequently judge unknown individuals based on appearance, with attractiveness being associated with impressions of competence, there is a growing literature analyzing the importance of candidates' physical appearance on electoral outcomes. In particular, people infer competence, trustworthiness, and intelligence only from facial features (Zebrowitz et al. 2002), producing inferences about political traits from appearance that are often biased (Herrmann and Shikano 2016). Todorov et al. (2005) show that voters will use appearance to infer competence, intelligence, leadership, trustworthiness, charisma, and likeability – ultimately influencing their propensity to vote for these candidates. Other work has observed that the attractiveness 'halo' leads not only to higher competency ratings but to candidates with higher competency scores performing better (Verhulst, Lodge, and Lavine 2010), particularly in marginal constituencies (Mattes and Milazzo 2014).<sup>1</sup> Spezio et al. (2008) argue that the appearance effect is driven mainly by negative attributions from appearance rather than positive. Other work has found that attractiveness plays a role in electoral success but is mediated by perceptions of facial competence (Laustsen 2014) or by perceived femininity,

dynamism, congeniality, and age (Sigelman, Sigelman, and Fowler 1987). Jackle et al. (2020) also find that attractiveness positively affects electoral outcomes, whereas perceived likability and competence do not play a significant role.

Research has shown that the benefits of appearance can vary with political context (Banducci et al. 2008; Casey 2017; Campbell and Cowley 2014; Hayes, Lawless, and Baitinger 2014; Lawson et al. 2010). The most important of these include information about candidates and voter sophistication, as well as the accessibility of information on candidate appearance.

Benefits to appearance have been shown to be greatest in elections where the information acquisition cost is high and when elections focus on individual candidates instead of on parties (Lawson et al. 2010). Banducci et al. (2008) also argue that low information environments lead to conditions in which voters infer attributes from candidate appearance and include attractiveness as a factor in their decision-making. Casey (2017) also suggests that, in limited information environments, inferences made based on candidates' photos predict the winner of elections. Voters with weak party attachment rely more strongly on candidates' physical attractiveness as a heuristic (Johns and Shephard 2011).

The structure of electoral institutions also regulates the importance of candidate information. Stockemer and Praino (2017), using data from German elections, identified that the effect of physical attractiveness is limited to "open list" systems – those that allow voters to cast their ballot for a candidate instead of a party, and where this vote is decisive in which legislators are actually elected. Similarly, Lawson et al. (2010) conducted a series of studies using pictures of candidates in Brazil and Mexico, which found that the importance of appearance as a predictor of candidates' success is greater in the context of candidate-centered voting and in low information environments.<sup>2</sup>

The effect of candidate appearance has also been shown to depend on the availability of information about appearance, for example, increasing when voters are subject to extensive use of candidate campaign posters (Herrmann and Shikano 2020). In countries where photographs appear directly on the ballot, there is even more opportunity to judge candidates on appearance (Banducci et al. 2008; Lawson et al. 2010). Ahler et al. (2017) conducted experiments on the effects of ballot photos, finding that showing photos to voters increased the vote for candidates considered the most attractive.

Physical attractiveness has been shown to play a more important role as a heuristic for uninformed voters compared to politically sophisticated voters (Stockemer and Praino 2015). Hart, Ottati, and Krumdick (2011) show that more knowledgeable voters even overcorrect the physical attractiveness stereotype, evaluating an attractive candidate more negatively than the unattractive candidate, while less knowledgeable voters evaluated the attractive candidate more positively. Ballot design also plays a role in regulating the impact of low information on voting because it influences the prominence of candidates (Darcy and Schneider 1989; Kimball and Kropf 2005), particularly in the absence of other information (Ho and Imai 2008). In systems with candidates listed on the ballot, candidates listed first often obtain a bonus in preference votes (Lutz 2010; Villodres and Garcia de la Puerta 2004). Thus appearance effects due to low information voters reacting to ballot photos may also be regulated by candidate placement.

Overall, existing studies have shown that more attractive candidates running for office have an electoral advantage, particularly in contexts where candidates are the focus of the election, depicted on the ballot, and where voters are lacking in information about candidates and partisan attachments.

Our synthesis of the existing research thus leads to two hypotheses that we evaluate below:

(H1) there is a positive correlation between the attractiveness index and relative electoral success

(H2) the effect of attractiveness will be greater for candidates at more visible locations on the ballot.

Another area that has received attention in this literature is the effect of candidate gender. For example, some have argued that physical attractiveness may be more of an asset for males and could be a liability for females (C. Sigelman et al. 1986). However, findings overall have been mixed. Hayes, Lawless, and Baitinger (2014) find effects of attractiveness in news media portrayals but no difference between men and women candidates. Lewis and Bierly (1990) look at voter perceptions and find that while physical attractiveness was positively related to perceived competence for male and female politicians, women show a pro-female bias in evaluating female politicians' competence. Although mixed, the results in the literature suggest that there is value in accounting for possible gender differences in appearance effects, and thus we examine how the effect varies by both candidate and voter gender for the hypothesized relationships above.

### **The case of Ecuador**

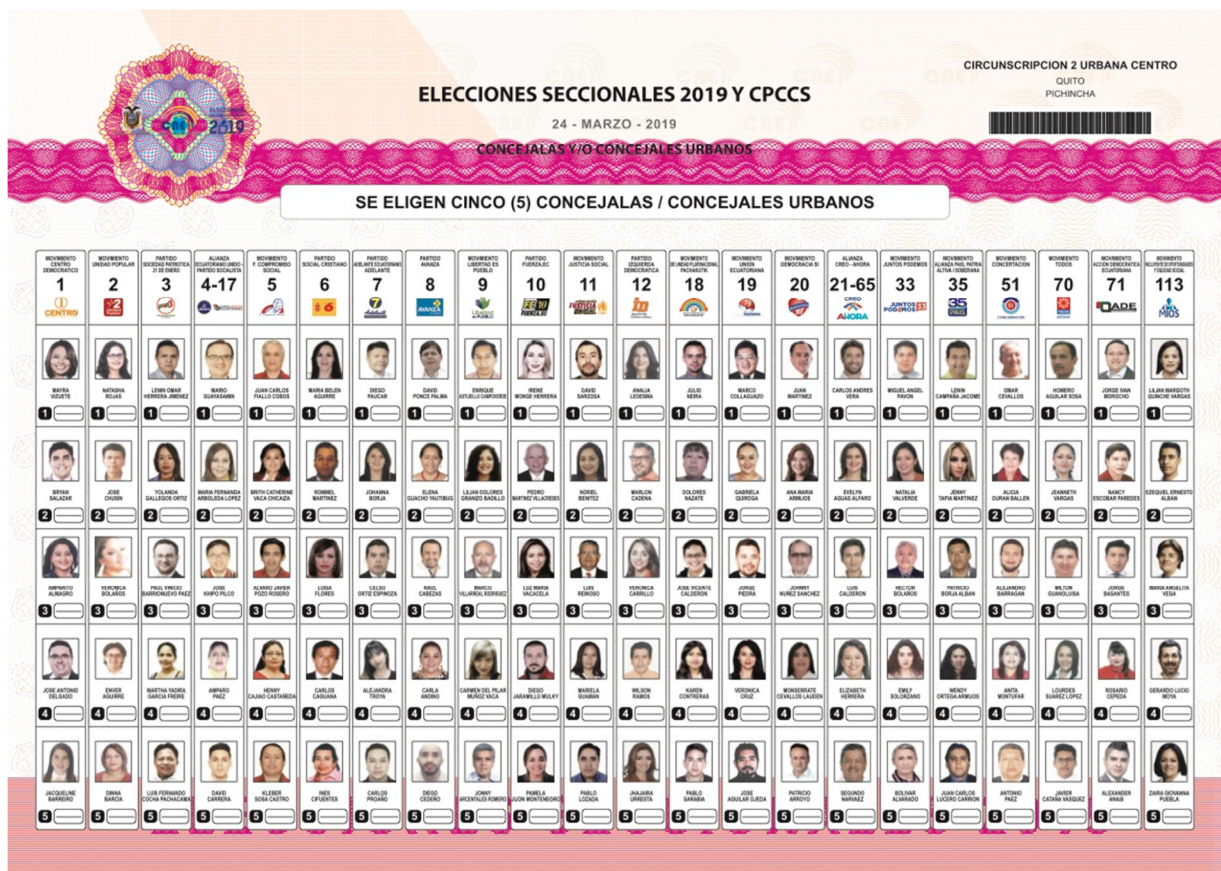
As noted above, the literature on attractiveness has generally been limited to advanced democracies. Nevertheless, key findings in this literature suggest that we would find attractiveness effects even more starkly in lower information and candidate-centered environments, as we see in developing countries, less programmatic party systems, and systems with weak party labels and organizations. We build on previous research by testing how candidate attractiveness influences outcomes in Ecuador, specifically the context of the 2019 city council elections of the Metropolitan District of Quito. Local elections in Ecuador include several factors that create a context in which



candidate appearance has the potential to sway voter behavior and allow us to examine the arguments from the literature presented above. First, the level of political sophistication is low. According to the Americas Barometer 2019 survey, most voters (68.3%) have little or no interest in politics. Ecuador also employs compulsory voting, a factor that has been shown to result in voters expending less effort on their voting decision (Singh and Roy 2018). In addition, the electorate in Ecuador has a relatively weak attachment to parties in general, with more people disliking a political party than identifying with one, and only 20% of the population reporting trust in political parties.

Importantly, Ecuador's ballot allows voters to see pictures of all candidates when they vote, as shown in Figure 1. In addition, recent elections saw further growth in the number of parties and thus the number of candidates and the ballot. Compared to countries without ballot photos and more party-centric party systems, Ecuador thus has both a high availability of candidate images and a complex set of candidate-centric choices, creating conditions for voting behavior that previous literature would suggest has the potential to be influenced by physical appearance. In addition to the ballot itself, voters can also become familiar with candidate images during campaigns, as they also feature prominently on television, social media, billboards, posters, and walls.

Figure 1: Example of Ecuador Council Ballot, 2019



The electoral system in Ecuador, the “free list” proportional system, is not only candidate-centered in a similar fashion to open lists but also allows a voter to cast preference votes for multiple candidates across different parties up to the number of representatives in the district.<sup>3</sup> Within each political party list, the seats are allocated in the order determined by the number of personal votes the candidate gets. This electoral system creates within-party competition that significantly enhances the role of candidate features (Lev-On and Waismel-Manor 2016). Since Ecuador had a large number of candidates and parties in this election, the ballots were also especially large, making placement on the ballot especially important. Previous research in other fields has shown that when presented with larger choices, subjects tend to rely more on cues (e.g.

Lenton and Francesconi 2010) and avoid risk (Iyengar and Kamenica 2010). The system also allows a candidate to represent a single party or an electoral alliance of different political parties (Dandoy 2019), adding to the candidate-centered nature of elections.

## **Methodology**

### **Data**

Data containing information about council election results of the Metropolitan District of Quito in 2019 was provided by Ecuador's National Electoral Council. This data set also contains information about candidates' characteristics, such as age and votes obtained by the candidate in the male and female polling stations, respectively. Since this data set does not include information on candidates' level of education, it was merged with a data set provided by the Secretariat for Higher Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (SENESCYT) that registers all Ecuadorian citizens and permanent residents' academic degrees, allowing us to determine whether candidates held higher education degrees. The final data set contains information on 456 candidates.

### **Measuring attractiveness**

To evaluate the overall attractiveness of the municipal candidates, we used a web survey administered to respondents recruited at a large Ecuadorian university.<sup>4</sup> Our purpose was to obtain a general score of perceived attractiveness to apply to the candidates in the election. The pictures used were obtained from the official Electoral Council of Ecuador website and were the same as

those used in the ballot. Raters were asked to rate each picture according to attractiveness level with a prompt and rating scheme described as follows:

Please rate the level of physical attractiveness of the person in the picture.

- 1= Very unattractive
- 2 = Below average
- 3 = Average
- 4 = Above average
- 5= Very handsome or beautiful

Each subject rated 20 pictures or less, with each picture rated by least at least 30 students, and the attractiveness score was the result of averaging these scores.<sup>5</sup> For the data analysis, the replies were coded from 1 to 5. Of the photos, 243 were of men and 213 of women.

### **Measuring relative electoral success**

We measure the dependent variable, relative electoral success, using the method suggested by Berggren, Jordahl, and Poutvaara (2010). We generate a percentage of the number of votes of a candidate relative to the average number of votes for the candidates in the list. This relative measure intends to account for differences in party popularity, circumscription size, and the number of candidates a party runs within a circumscription. Thus, it should be comparable for candidates in all parties and circumscriptions, independently of differences in size or party popularity.

To study the effects of attractiveness on the performance of Metropolitan District of Quito council candidates in the 2019 elections, we estimate an ordinary least square (OLS) model with random effects for each party. To account for the possibility that the effect of attractiveness on relative electoral success might vary depending on the candidate's general location on the ballot, we follow an approach similar to that used by Tchintian (2018) to construct a measure of ballot

position. We divide the ballot area into four quadrants and generate a categorical variable to represent them (upper left =1, upper right =2, bottom left=3, and bottom right=4). Following Tchintian, we expect the upper left quadrant to be the most prominent location. Tchintian (2018) also suggests that the other quadrants will follow a ‘Z pattern,’ based on findings in graphic design, such that attention will go from the top right to bottom left and then bottom right.

In addition to the key independent variables, we control for several features that characterize the candidate, such as gender of the candidate, age, education, and district. Furthermore, we control for the popularity of the party, measured as the percentage of the party’s votes relative to the votes in the circumscription. Since studies have recognized the advantage of being first listed on the ballot (Grant 2017; Chen et al. 2014), we separately control for the bonus for the first position on the party list by including a dummy variable that takes the value of 1 if the candidate occupies the first position in the list. A description of all variables is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics**

Variable name	Type	Description	Mean	Min	Max
Electoral success	Continuous	Candidate's relative electoral success	26.65	11.66	117.61
Electoral success	Continuous	Candidate's relative electoral success (male voters only)	53.29	25.08	104.92
Electoral success	Continuous	Candidate's relative electoral success (female voters only)	46.71	23.02	109.60
Candidate's attractiveness	Continuous	Candidate's attractiveness score	1.92	1.23	4.00
Female	Binary	1 if candidate is female	0.47	0.00	1.00
30 or younger	Binary	1 if candidate is 30 years old or younger	0.16	0.00	1.00
Bachelor's degree	Binary	1 if candidate has a bachelor's degree	0.02	0.00	1.00
Candidate in first ballot place	Binary	1 if candidate is the first in the list	0.19	0.00	1.00
Party's popularity	Continuous	Party's percentage of votes in the district	4.60	0.58	27.78
District	Categorical	0 = rural district	0.28	0.00	1.00
		1 = north district	0.24	0.00	1.00
		2 = central district	0.24	0.00	1.00
		3 = south district	0.24	0.00	1.00

Position in the ballot	Categorical	1 = upper left	0.28	0.00	1.00
		1 = upper right	0.29	0.00	1.00
		2 = bottom left	0.21	0.00	1.00
		3 = bottom right	0.22	0.00	1.00

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## **Results**

Table 2 present the results of OLS regressions for relative electoral success. In Model 1, we include the attractiveness variable and the control variables described above. In Model 2, we include an interaction of gender with attractiveness to explore whether the effect of attractiveness differs for male and female candidates. Finally, in Model 3, we include the quadrant variable and interact it with attractiveness.



**Table 2: Linear regression results, Effects of Attractiveness on Electoral success**

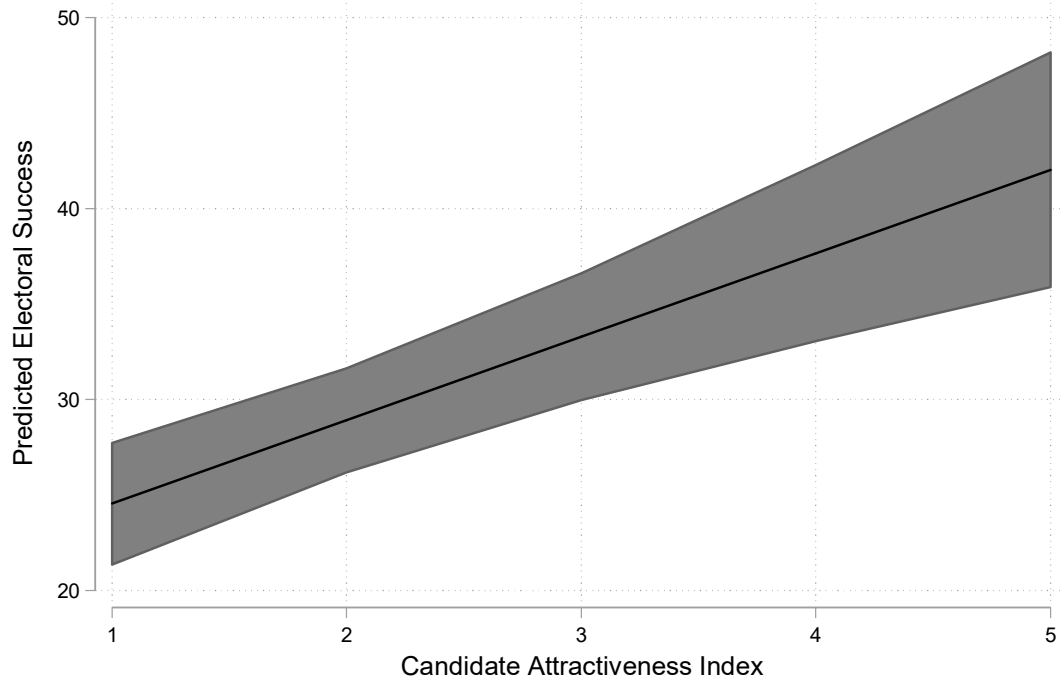
Dependent variable: Electoral success			
Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)
Candidate's attractiveness	4.369*** (0.915)	2.928** (1.457)	5.102*** (1.769)
Female candidate	1.364* (0.799)	-2.544 (3.222)	-3.491 (3.127)
30 years old or younger	0.526 (1.054)	0.494 (1.044)	1.813* (1.037)
Bachelor's degree	4.037 (2.789)	3.871 (2.766)	4.546* (2.714)
Candidate in first ballot place	9.880*** (0.892)	9.906*** (0.884)	7.712*** (0.924)
North district	-7.697*** (0.951)	-7.767*** (0.942)	-8.109*** (0.919)
Center district	-7.583*** (0.961)	-7.419*** (0.961)	-7.519*** (0.937)
South district	-7.637*** (0.943)	-7.517*** (0.939)	-7.799*** (0.914)
Party's popularity	1.551*** (0.179)	1.596*** (0.181)	1.523*** (0.172)
Second Quadrant			9.120** (4.374)

Third Quadrant			2.892
			(4.326)
Four Quadrant			9.822**
			(4.605)
Female X Attractiveness	2.120		2.799*
	(1.689)		(1.642)
Quadrant 2 X Attractiveness			-4.249**
			(1.757)
Quadrant 3 X Attractiveness			-4.613**
			(2.239)
Quadrant 4 X Attractiveness			-6.077***
			(1.983)
Constant	15.91***	18.14***	15.66***
	(2.251)	(2.950)	(3.791)
Observations	456	456	456
R2	0.13	0.13	0.16

Standard errors in parentheses \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

All models show a statistically significant effect for a candidate's attractiveness on relative electoral success. On average, the improvements in candidate vote share increase with higher attractiveness scores. After controlling for age, education, party popularity, and geographical representation of the candidate, every additional point in the attractiveness measure implies a candidate obtains about 4.3% more votes than the average candidate in their list. One standard deviation change in attractiveness increases electoral success by approximately 2%. These results are much smaller than those obtained by Berggren, Jordahl, and Poutvaara (2010), who found that one standard deviation increase in the attractiveness measure is associated with an increase of 20% in the electoral success measure. The substantive effect of attractiveness on electoral success from the first model is depicted in Figure 2.

**Figure 2. Marginal effect of candidate attractiveness index on relative electoral success**

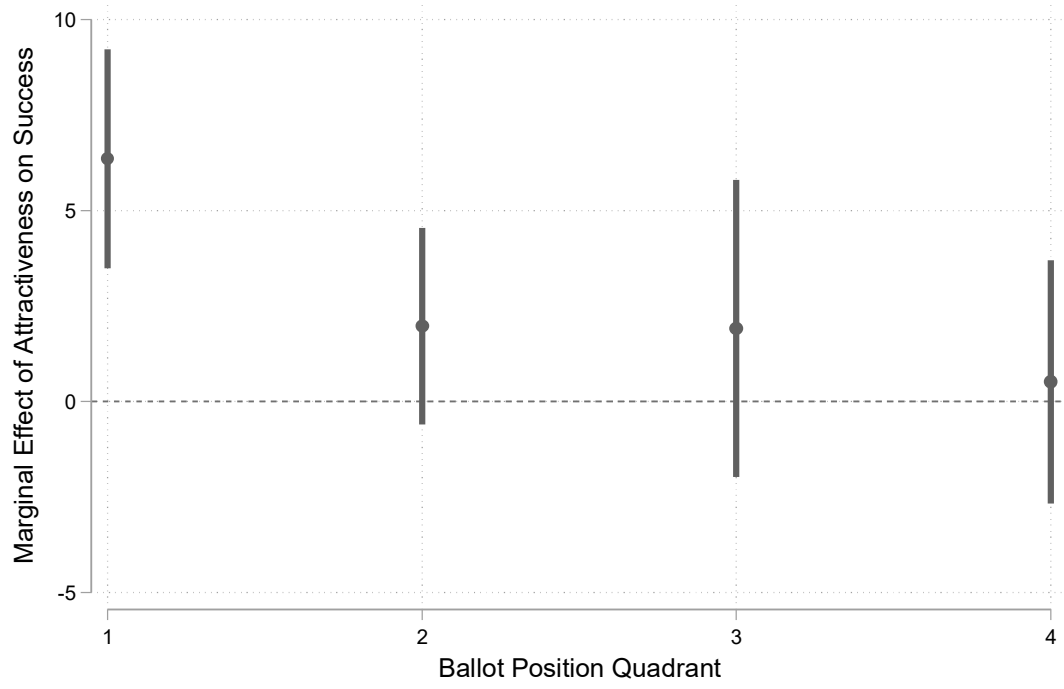


As some literature has suggested that candidate gender may influence the effect of attractiveness, we include an interaction between gender and attractiveness in Model 2, which shows that the effect of attractiveness on candidate success does not vary overall by candidate gender.

In Model 3, we include the interaction term between ballot position and attractiveness, which shows that the main effect of attractiveness increases in magnitude with more prominent ballot positions. When moving from the upper left to bottom right quadrant, the effect of attractiveness diminishes (Figure 3). In fact, the effect is statistically significant only within the upper left, most consistent with a general left-to-right spatial emphasis, consistent with patterns of sequencing in viewing visual media (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2007). This finding suggests that attractiveness plays an especially important role for candidates positioned prominently on the ballot and suggests that the photo ballot enables the attractiveness effects we find here.

In Table 3, Model 4, we add an additional interaction with candidate position on the ballot, to evaluate the conditional effect of attractiveness on relative electoral success for male and female candidates. Although the observational data in this study does not generally allow direct inferences from voter characteristics, one important exception is that Ecuador uses a system with separate polling stations for men and women. Using these data, in Models 5 and 6 we use these separated data and analyze candidates' electoral success among male and female voters to identify any differences by voter gender in the effect of attractiveness and of the gender of candidates, taking into account the location of candidates in the ballot.

**Figure 3: Marginal effects of attractiveness on electoral success conditional on ballot position quadrant**



**Table 3: Linear regression results, Effects of Attractiveness on Electoral success, separated by male and female voters**

Dependent variable: Electoral success			
Variables	voters	male voters	female voters
Candidate's attractiveness	3.837** (1.869)	2.450 (2.857)	6.836*** (2.396)
Female candidate	-2.046 (3.231)	5.430 (4.953)	-10.56** (4.155)
30 years old or younger	1.765* (1.007)	0.190 (1.543)	1.222 (1.294)
Bachelor's degree	4.936* (2.632)	9.854** (4.073)	2.904 (3.417)
Candidate in first ballot place	7.913*** (0.908)	14.99*** (1.426)	14.88*** (1.196)
North district	-8.268*** (0.891)	2.731** (1.378)	-4.910*** (1.156)
Center district	-7.553*** (0.908)	3.871*** (1.425)	-6.877*** (1.195)
South district	-7.872*** (0.887)	3.435** (1.392)	-5.771*** (1.167)
Party's popularity	1.654*** (0.175)	-0.0735 (0.0892)	0.0539 (0.0748)

Second Quadrant	6.472	-2.747	13.89***
	(4.821)	(5.949)	(4.990)
Third Quadrant	-0.846	-14.82**	1.813
	(4.787)	(7.385)	(6.194)
Fourth Quadrant	5.251	-7.697	11.85**
	(5.423)	(7.170)	(6.014)
Female X Attractiveness	3.157*	-1.082	9.336***
	(1.692)	(2.598)	(2.179)
Quadrant 2 X Attractiveness	-2.341	1.224	-9.292***
	(2.227)	(3.372)	(2.829)
Quadrant 3 X Attractiveness	-1.660	1.527	-4.774
	(2.835)	(4.373)	(3.668)
Quadrant 4 X Attractiveness	-2.580	1.583	-8.857**
	(2.958)	(4.558)	(3.823)
Female X Quadrant 2 X Attractiveness	-1.229	-0.216	-0.452
	(0.940)	(1.465)	(1.228)
Female X Quadrant 3 X Attractiveness	-1.844*	0.571	-2.840**
	(1.091)	(1.703)	(1.429)
Female X Quadrant 4t X Attractiveness	-2.012	-1.022	-3.220**
	(1.242)	(1.940)	(1.627)



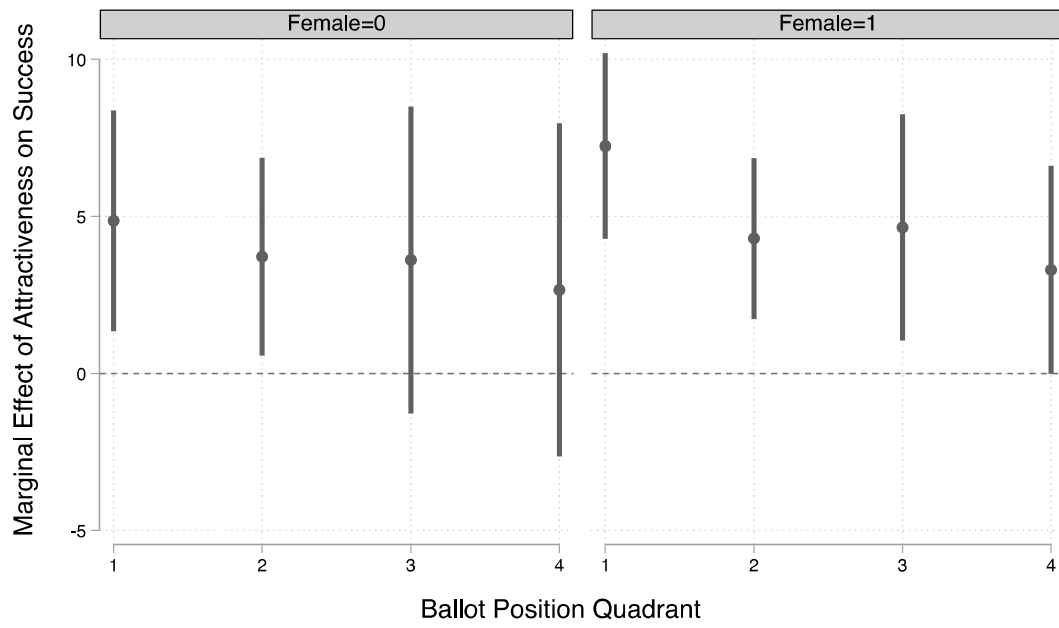
Constant	16.67*** (3.915)	45.86*** (5.057)	35.28*** (4.242)
Observations	456	456	456
R2	0.15	0.45	0.58

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Standard errors in parentheses \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

In light of the findings related to the upper-left quadrant of the ballot above, we also examine the effects of candidate gender when allowing the effect to vary by ballot position. In Table 3, we introduce an interaction to evaluate the effect of attractiveness on relative electoral success for male and female candidates while taking into account their position on the ballot. In Figure 4, we plot the marginal effects of attractiveness by candidate gender and quadrant. Although there remains no substantial difference in the effect of attractiveness by candidate gender, the effect of attractiveness is more consistent for female candidates.

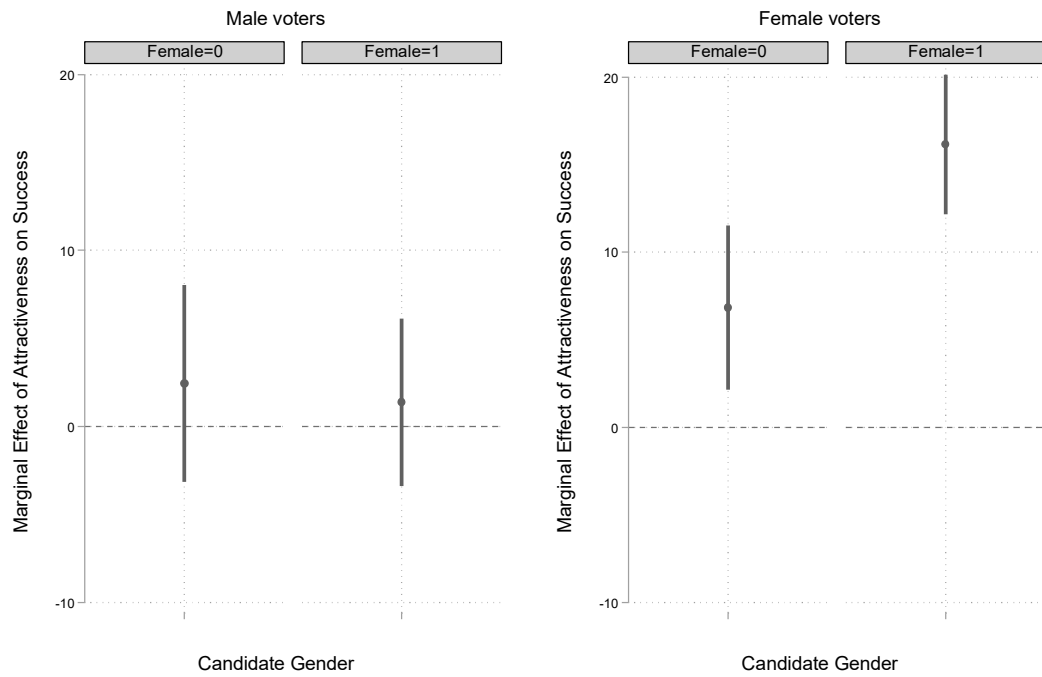
**Figure 4: Marginal effects of attractiveness on electoral success for male and female candidates by ballot location quadrant**



Finally, in Models 5 and 6, we also examine these results across both male and female voters, exploiting the gender separation between polling stations in Ecuador. The marginal effects of attractiveness by candidate gender isolating the upper left quadrant, with the data separated by male and female polling stations, are plotted in Figure 5. Separating by gender of voters reveals a notable difference in voter tendencies, with statistically significant attractiveness effects present only in the set of female voters. Among female voters, there is also a stronger effect for female candidates than for male candidates.

The differences seen using the separated polling stations by men and women may result many possible associations with other relevant variables. For example, this effect could be related to gender differences in voters' political knowledge or information levels. An analysis by Fraile and Gomez (2015) shows a consistent gap in political knowledge between men and women in Ecuador. Given the literature described above that suggests appearance plays a larger role when information is lower due to the potential for it to serve a heuristic function, this could explain some of the differences we find between male and female voters in sensitivity to appearance.

**Figure 5: Marginal effects of attractiveness on electoral success for male and female candidates in the upper-left ballot position, separated by voter gender**



## **Conclusions and Discussion**

In this paper, we examined the potential for voting environments to enable voting based on appearance. A variety of research has shown that candidate appearance can be a factor under some conditions. In particular, candidate-focused elections, lower information environments, and the accessibility of information on candidate appearance are all thought to increase the importance of attractiveness in elections.

We examine these claims in the case of Ecuador's municipal elections, which possess many features predicted by the literature to enhance the importance of attractiveness as a factor in elections. In particular, voters must make choices based on a complex and highly candidate-centered electoral system but may often lack information about the candidates. Most importantly, the ballots provide photos of each candidate, which allow voters to associate their choices with candidate campaign images and enhance the potential for candidate appearance to act as an influential heuristic in the context of low-information decision-making.

First, in line with previous research, we find that attractiveness positively affects candidate evaluation and election outcomes. We also find that the effect of attractiveness is stronger for candidates in the upper left quadrant of the ballot, suggesting that ballot designs with candidate photos can create an opportunity for attractiveness and ballot placement to interact. These findings are also important for the growing literature on ballot design because our findings suggest that the effects of appearance are enabled by the presence of candidate photos on ballots.

We also conduct additional exploratory analysis to evaluate whether the effects of appearance vary by the gender of the candidate and find that, overall, there is no significant difference in the effect of attractiveness by gender. When we consider the candidate's position on the ballot, we still do not find stark differences by gender, but we find somewhat greater

consistency in the appearance effect for female candidates, especially when placed in the upper left corner of the ballot. Using data available from the gender-separated polling stations in Ecuador, we examine whether the effects of candidate appearance differ for male and female voters. Here we find evidence that the effects of candidate appearance are stronger for female voters, particularly for female candidates. We speculate that this effect could be related to other variables, such as differences in voter knowledge or information levels, which have been shown within Ecuador to differ by gender (Fraile and Gomez 2017).

Normatively, the results highlight the potential for arbitrary factors playing a role in elections such as Ecuador's, where high demands are placed on voters who may be highly disengaged from politics and where most parties lack informative reputations. While candidate appearance has been shown to be relevant in many contexts, our findings suggest that the combination of factors evident in Ecuador's municipal elections may contribute to this phenomenon. Nevertheless, because this is an especially likely case to find such effects, we note that these findings could also represent an upper bound on the effect of candidate attractiveness on election outcomes. Future studies should examine both developing and advanced democracies to better evaluate the boundaries of the scope conditions for these effects.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

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## Notes

1. Note that judgments of attractiveness are also endogenous to performance, associated with whether or not a candidate wins his or her election and the percent of the vote share that he or she obtains (Milazzo and Mattes 2016).
2. Notably, the study also finds that cultural, ethnic, and racial differences did not affect the judgment about candidate appearance (Lawson et al. 2010)
3. Seats are allocated using the D'Hondt method, in which the number of seats awarded to each party list depends on the sum of votes that all candidates on that list get together, compared to the number of votes of all other parties.
4. One limitation of university-age raters could be that perception of attractiveness can differ considerably between age groups. However, a study conducted by Foos and Clark (2011) shows that although such differences in perceptions do exist, the division in age is mainly between those over and under age 60, the latter comprising the bulk of the electorate. In this jurisdiction, 11.3% of the electoral register were voters over 65 years old in the 2019 elections. Hence, differences in perception of attractiveness by age likely do not substantially contribute to bias in the attractiveness measurement.
5. In order to ensure the quality of the attractiveness score, respondents with non-differentiation in ratings were dropped from the final measure.

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