The Symmetric Advantage?
Ballot Type, Gender, & Facial Attractiveness in the Mexican Chamber of Deputies

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Research Question
Do voters prioritize facial appearance differently than party members when choosing candidates?

Abstract
Some research suggests that candidates with a “pretty face” may have an electoral advantage, but it is less clear whether this advantage is due to the information shortcut taken by low-information voters, or whether it is due to deeper cognitive preferences that apply equally in low- and high-information voters. Mexico’s Chamber of Deputies, which elects 300 members from single-member plurality districts and 200 members from political parties (based on the results of a closed-list proportional representation vote), offers a natural experiment to test this effect. We analyze photographs of the members of the 2015-2018 Mexican Chamber of Deputies to calculate facial symmetry, and while we fail to find a significant difference for male candidates, it is less clear whether this advantage is due to the information shortcut taken by low-information voters, or whether it is due to deeper cognitive preferences that apply equally in low- and high-information voters.

Background Literature
Appearance & vote choice
- Heuristic for candidate policy position
  - (Sigelman et al. 1987; McDermott 1998; Koch 2000; Henrick et al. 2015)
- Influences perceptions of candidate competence/qualities
  - (Sapiro 1981-1982; Sigelman et al. 1987; Alexander and Anderson 1993)
- The attractiveness advantage
  - Easier for attractive people to win elections
    - (Sigelman et al. 1987; Roser et al. 2008; Milazzo and Mattea 2016)
  - Viewed as more interesting, successful, socially competent, & memorable

The symmetric advantage

Theory
Mixed electoral systems means that candidates are elected by both:
- Low information voters (direct election from SMD lists)
- High information “voters” (party elite who appoint to PR list)

Hypothesis 1: MPs elected from SMD ballots will be more attractive than MPs selected from the PR party lists.

Hypothesis 2a: Female MPs elected from SMD ballots will be more attractive than male MPs.

Hypothesis 2b: Female MPs elected from PR party lists will be less attractive than male MPs.

Research Design
Sample: Mexican Chamber of Deputies (2015-2018)
Info on members of parliament (MPs) from Chamber of Deputies & Sistema de Información Legislativa websites

Facial Symmetry by Gender & Electoral System
Mean symmetry scores with standard error bars based on t-tests

Main findings:
- Ballot type has a significant impact on women:
  - Women MPs directly elected by voters have the most symmetric faces
  - Women MPs selected by parties score significantly lower on facial symmetry than other women or male MPs
- Younger MPs have significantly higher symmetry scores than older MPs
- Education & prior experience failed to reach significance

Conclusion
- Findings support previous literature suggesting that attractiveness can be a double-edged sword for women candidates
- Voters are selecting “prettier” female candidates, but are parties discriminating against “pretty” candidates or saving them for the SMD lists?
- Next step for this project:
  - Quasi-experimental study in Mexico on symmetry & candidate electability
  - Tracing symmetry scores over time

Other Research
My primary research interest is in ethnic & communal conflict, conflict mediation, & comparative (democratic) institutional design.

Recent publications and working papers include:
- “Ethnic political exclusion and terrorism: Analyzing the local conditions for violent conflict”
  - with Stephen Nemeth & Jacob Masiakiewicz, forthcoming in Conflict Management and Peace Science
- “United Nations Peacekeeping and Domestic Terrorism: Short-Term Risks and the Importance of Mission Design”
  - with Stephen Nemeth & Jacob Masiakiewicz (Review & Resubmit)
- “Shared Interests, Risky Bluffs, and "Winning" the WTO’s Dispute Settlement Proceedings”
  - with Taylor Todd (in progress)