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The Effect of Weight on the Perception of Political Candidates

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THE EFFECT OF WEIGHT ON THE PERCEPTION OF POLITICAL CANDIDATES

by

Kennedy Alix Costantino
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Chris Christie recently visited the famous “Wailing Wall” in Jerusalem, Israel, during his first trip abroad as governor of New Jersey. The New York Post reported on his trip with the headline “The Whale at the Wall” (Campanile 2012). Given headlines like this, it is easy to see anecdotal evidence of the stigmatization that surrounds obesity within contemporary American society. What’s more important is that these social stigmas that Americans are faced with every day are not merely surface level jokes bantered about for a cheap laugh. They are often prejudices that permeate every aspect of human life. Whether it comes to finding a date, looking for a job, or trying to be taken serious by one’s peers, weight is always a topic of concern. In an effort to understand how far entrenched these biases are in society, this thesis studies the ramifications of obesity in politics. In this thesis, I attempt to understand to what extent, if any, obesity matters in regard to candidate appearance, voters' choices, and political behavior.

In order to address the issues raised in this thesis, I will proceed in two steps. First, I will review the previous literature written on the topic from a top-down approach, integrating research on obesity in the United States with research on how voters think about politics and evaluate political candidates. This part will include an overview of the anti-fat bias in the United States, looking at how obesity matters to social attitudes in general. From there, I will consider the issue of how citizens make political decisions, with an eye towards explaining why appearance-based cues—such as a policymaker’s or candidate’s weight—might be considered in the role it plays in day-to-day evaluations of those who are overweight, along with the extent that appearance matters more for women than for men. Put simply, given the existing research, it is reasonable to expect that, all else equal, citizens will evaluate obese candidates more negatively than “normal weight” candidates with the same qualifications and policy positions.
The second approach that this thesis takes is incorporating the information gleaned from a review of the literature and putting it to the test in the context of a survey experiment. Based on the aforementioned review, I develop and test three hypotheses. First, I expect that a candidate’s weight in general will matter to evaluations of political candidates: obese candidates will be evaluated more negatively than non-obese ones. Second, I expect that weight will matter more for female candidates than for male candidates, given research that suggests that women are judged more strongly on their appearance than are men. Finally, I expect that a voter’s level of political attentiveness will affect how important weight is as a factor in candidate evaluations: voters that are less politically attentive will place greater emphasis on a candidate’s weight when deciding how to evaluate them. Though there are some exceptions, the results from the experiment are consistent with the literature and with my hypotheses. Taken together, the findings add to the growing literature regarding how voters use appearance-based cues to make political decisions.
Chapter 2
Obesity in the United States

Weight

Obesity rates in the United States are rising. While it is hard to pinpoint exactly when obesity became the ‘epidemic’ it is referred to as today, the World Health Organization (WHO) suggests that the rates of obesity in North America have tripled since 1980 (World Health Organization). Similarly, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) gives shocking statistics about the state-by-state breakdown of percentage of adults considered ‘obese’ by calendar year. The CDC data only dates back to 1985 and does not show data for every state until 1994. Yet even given this limited information, the patterns clearly show that in 1994, no state had over 14% obesity rates in adults (Center for Disease Control). In 2010, no state has less than 20% of citizens who are considered obese, and a majority of the states have percentage rates above 25% (Center for Disease Control). Today, one out of every three adults is overweight, one out of every six children is overweight, and current trends indicate that by 2018, 40% of all Americans will be obese (“The Obesity Epidemic”, CBSNews, & Hellmich).

Reasons given by organizations such as the WHO for this dramatic climb in obesity rates cite increased consumption of foods high in saturated fats and sugars, and a decrease in rates of exercise also attributable to more sedentary lifestyles (World Health Organization). Larger food portion sizes and an increase in usage of prescription drugs might also play a role (Center for Disease Control).

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1 For the purposes of this study, it is not important to judge the exact distinction between what it means to be ‘overweight’ versus being ‘obese’ because these two terms are often used interchangeably. But for clarification the definition the CDC uses to demarcate ‘overweight’, is understood to be a person having a Body Mass Index (BMI) between 25.0 and 29.9 (Center for Disease Control). The term ‘obese’ is used to describe an individual with a BMI of 30.0 or above (Center for Disease Control).
While it is important to understand how and why the public is becoming more obese, and what the health consequences of obesity are, the proximate topic here is whether obesity matters to how citizens are viewed by others. When it comes to deciphering whether or not the weight of a political candidate matters in his or her election for higher office, we must first address the issue of how obesity is viewed within the context of American society. It might not be true that people are always judgmental of others’ weight. However, the reality is that, on average, when it Americans view individuals who are more obese, their opinions of them are clouded with negative stereotypes (Crandall, 1994).

How does America react towards overweight individuals? In personal observances, it is easy to understand that most people tend to have underlying judgments about individuals who are overweight, even if they don’t explicitly admit to them. In conversations with friends, family, and acquaintances, those who are overweight are deemed to be lazy, more unattractive, and less desirable as a person in general. When turning on the television, shows rarely have female leads who are overweight. Instead, mainstream television shows glorify those with slim figures, and focus the spotlight only on those who are thin. We even see that the celebrities who are so exalted in our society are always thin. And if they are overweight, tabloids are filled with nasty headlines about how unattractive they are or have become since having gained weight. Even the more reputable magazines interview the famous by asking questions about how it feels to be overweight in a thin industry, and they inquire as to what steps the stars are taking to become thinner. The media and our culture tout the notion that being overweight is bad, and the opposite, being overly thin, is good (Harrison, 2001 and Ogden & Mundray, 1996).

Many studies have undertaken the task of empirically proving what we observe every day to be true, that stigmatization of overweight people is a pervasive issue in today’s society.
Characteristics that are commonly associated with overweight individuals based on appearance alone include being unattractive, “aesthetically displeasing”, “morally and emotionally impaired”, "alienated from their sexuality”, “discontent with themselves”, and flat out “unlikeable” (Crandall, 1994). These deleterious ratings are not made by peers, but are also evaluations made by “health care workers, employers…, parents, and even by [the obese] themselves” (Crandall, 1994, pg. 883). These findings suggest how pervasive the bias is. Not only does it infiltrate the evaluation of others on the obese, but it even permeates how the obese think of themselves. If the obese are not even able to think highly, or even well, of themselves, one can only imagine how low the obese are esteemed to be in others perceptions of them. Further study suggests that obesity is “highly stigmatizing” and that people who are overweight are subject to “multiple forms of discrimination”. On average, individuals who have moderate to severe obesity are more likely than healthy weight individuals to report discrimination over their lifetime (Hansson et. al, 2011, pg. 593). Research into the topic of obesity shows that these negative characteristics associated with being overweight significantly matters when it comes to “employment opportunities, acceptance into college, rental applications, wages, and marriage opportunities” (Rowe, et. al, 2003, pg. 120).

The stigma that comes along with being overweight is a notion that begins from childhood. School, a first form of peer social interaction for many children, is a place where those kids who are overweight often find themselves the victims of bullying and being ostracized by their classmates (Sobal & Maurer, 1999). To be overweight is to have a serious impediment that can impact your social life, even at a young age. It would seem this peer stigmatization never goes away, as later in life the ability of the overweight to both become employed and to maintain a job is a more difficult task for the obese: heavier individuals have a more difficult
time obtaining a job, and tend to have decreased earning potential, when compared to average weight individuals (Sobal & Maurer, 1999). Not all employers, of course, are forthcoming about their evaluation of potential employees based on their weight. However the practice of paying attention to appearance by employers is “widely accepted” (Adamitis, 2000). Some employers—e.g., those that hire employees to perform physical labor—might have job-related reasons to discriminate against the obese. But even if physical fitness would not affect performance, many employers are averse to hiring an overweight candidate (Row & Eickwort, 1976).

Even if the obese are able to secure employment, they often find themselves the target of discrimination in the workplace. They are less likely to be promoted, to have been denied raises and benefits, and more likely to be fired, than the non-obese (Rothblum & Sovolay, 2009). Given that these overweight people are less likely to advance up the corporate ladder given the bias they face, it makes sense that being overweight is often thought to go hand in hand with lower levels of income, playing into the notion that being overweight is somehow a handicap (Sobal & Stunkard, 1989).

Obesity is clearly just one of many factors—race, gender, and religion are some others—that might cause some individuals to be socially stigmatized in some communities. What is different, however, about the type of stigma that accompanies obesity is that unlike many other social stigmas, it is often encouraged and accepted (Wang, et. al, 2004). While citizens are often taught to “hide” overt expressions of racism or sexism, for example, talking in a way that plays into negative stereotypes of overweight individuals is much more socially acceptable. Citizens are more likely to correlate the word “obese” with the word “bad”, and the word “thin” with the word “good” (Wang, et. al., 2004). Researchers have also discovered that unlike other socially stigmatized groups, people who are obese show no in-group bias (Crandall, 1994). This means
that those who are obese are just as likely to associate negative words with “obesity”, as are citizens who were not overweight (Crandall, 1994).

While biases against obese people are often explicit and overt, there are other biases against obese people that manifest themselves implicitly, or subconsciously. One study (Teachman et. al., 2003), for example, surveyed passers-by on a Connecticut beach where the general population sample of the area was found to be well distributed across the physical weight spectrum. For their first experiment, they conducted an Implicit Association Test (IAT), which like other studies attempt to discern information about subconscious biases by asking participants to make “snap” associations between overweight and healthy weight individuals and either positive or negative words (e.g. “good,” “dishonest”). The results found that there was, as expected, an implicit bias that most respondents had towards overweight individuals: respondents were more likely to associate negative terms with overweight individuals, and this was true even among respondents who claimed that they had no explicit bias against overweight people. The results also showed, however, that the explicit bias test had most people claiming a pro-fat bias. This demonstrates that when put to the test, people’s outward attitudes often do not always correspond with their ‘true’ beliefs. Therefore a person might think that they do not feel any negativity towards the obese, but subconsciously, they do feel such negativity.

Obesity also intersects with gender in many important ways. It is more likely for people to view obese women more negatively than overweight men. This is attributable in part to the commonly held sociocultural perspective that women are judged more based on their appearance than men are. However anecdotal it may be, when America sees a former People Magazine “Sexiest Man Alive” gain some weight, this man is still deemed attractive. However, whenever female celebrities gain weight, it is seen as tragic and her subsequent appeal decreases
substantially. Both men and women are more likely to be critical of obesity among women than among men (Jackson, 1992). There are myriad reasons out there as to why appearance matters more for women than it does for men, such as fitness being more related to reproductive fitness of women or due to the fact that society is more stigmatizing of unattractiveness in females than in males: “there is no question that females are judged by their attractiveness to a greater extent than are males” (Jackson, 1992, pg. 207). This ‘double standard’ suggests that while both men and women are subject to bias for being overweight, it is also more acceptable for men than for women to be overweight. Overweight women are less also likely to receive support in paying for college tuition, they are less likely to have face-to-face interactive jobs, and more likely to be depressed due to their obesity, as well as subject to a host of other unflattering stigmas (Bessenoff & Sherman, 2000; Crandall, 1995; Jackson, 1992; Miller, et. al., 1995; Stunkard, et. al., 2003). As evidenced above, the stigma of obesity carries applies to everyone. However, the point here is that to the extent that obesity matters, it will matter more when evaluating a woman’s appearance than when evaluating a man’s.

One such story that serves as both interesting and illustrative of this point is the account of Part-Time Fatso, the author is a self-described transgender. The author was born in a woman’s body, but feels as though she should have been born a man. Therefore, the author displays her physical appearance in a way more fitting with typical male appearances, i.e. short hair, men’s pants, and men’s shirts. The author says that about 60% of the time, he is assumed to be male, but 40% of the time, he is taken to be a female. This author also self-describes himself/herself as overweight. But what is interesting about his story is that when people believe he is a male, no one comments about his weight. No one tells him and he is overweight, no one heckles him, he doesn’t receive any dirty crossway glances. Yet, when he is assumed by others
to be a female, he is often “mooed” at, remarked upon by others for how “disgusting” a woman he is for being overweight, and generally stigmatized for his obesity (Bergman, 2009). In other words, when the author is perceived to be a male, he is seen as being of an acceptable weight. When he is perceived to be female, he is targeted as a "pig". This fascinating story plays up the notion that it is more acceptable for a man to be overweight than it is for a woman. This fits again with the broader literature which suggests that overweight women are stigmatized more than overweight men (Schur, 1984).

The discrepancy between evaluation of obese men and obese women can often be attributed to the media. On television, it is common to see female characters being portrayed on screen as those of thin, attractive women. When a woman who is overweight is cast, the audience can generally expect that the character will be “romantically ignored or treated as sexually unappealing by surrounding characters” (Ostertag, 2009, pg. 294). That overweight female character will also serve as “props against which thinner women are compared, judged” and ultimately valued (Ostertag, 2009, pg. 294).

In sum, the problem of weight in American culture pervades almost every aspect of day to day life. People tend to make judgments about the obese that are anything but positive. These biases go beyond mere likeability to real negative effects on the lives of obese people. And these ideals of appropriate appearances are most often demonstrated to citizens through use of visual images: put simply, people judged to be overweight based upon their appearance are typically viewed more negatively than those who are not.
Chapter 3
How Voters Make Decisions

If you’ve ever seen an episode of “The Tonight Show with Jay Leno”, you probably are ready to accept the idea that many Americans do not know much about politics or about the government in general. One Leno segment that highlights this particularly well is the segment, “Jay Walking”. This portion of the program asks random people on the streets questions such as, “who is the Vice President of the United States”, or “who is the Speaker of the House”? An overwhelming majority of those shown have no idea. This is done to highlight the “stupidity” of the American people, as self-proclaimed by the show. Now, the overwhelming number of people who do not know the answers to the questions being asked could be due to crafty editing on behalf of the show’s producers or it could be because they are asking an unfair or unrepresentative population sample. This segment is in no way scientific, but it does lead to a greater question of just how little does the American public know about politics? Unfortunately, it seems that Jay Leno’s program and their portrayal of the average American might not be so wrong.

Decades of scholarly research have supported the view that most voters are not interested in politics, nor do they possess much information about politics. Roughly one in four US citizens are able to identify one of the First Amendment freedoms and just one in one thousand who can name all five (Shenkman, 2008). The majority of Americans also do not know where the Constitution was drafted, how many Senators there are, the names of the three branches of government, who the first woman on the US Supreme Court was, that Congress can override a presidential veto, or that the Republican Party current has a majority in the U.S. House of Representatives (Shenkman, 2008; Kohut, et. al., 2011). These figures on their own are startling, but when put in context and compared to other information that people command, such as the
fact that the majority of Americans are able to accurately list all of the family members in the fictional cartoon “The Simpsons”, citizens levels of political knowledge seems even more bleak (Shenkman, 2008).

In addition to not having factual knowledge, most citizens do not think about politics in very high-level terms. The work of Lewis-Beck (2008), building on that of Campbell et al. (1960), works to categorize people into what they call ‘levels of conceptualization’ of politics. “Levels of conceptualization” are ways of essentially categorizing citizens based on how they view politics and make political decisions. The most well-informed citizens are placed into a category deemed “ideologues”. These are people who are able to understand party ideologies and party stances on policy issues, and explicitly make their policy choices based on these types of concerns. The next category, similar in nature, are the “near ideologues”. These are the citizens who are not completely able to connect policies with party stances, but show some familiarity with them, and make decisions based at least in part on policy concerns. The next group, called “Group Benefits”, consists of those who are not able to associate certain policies to certain candidates, but are able to understand politics in terms of rewards and penalties that politics assigns to different social or economic groups. In other words, these candidates understand which candidates are stereotypically associated with which groups of people or which groups of people certain candidates or parties traditionally advocate for. The fourth level on a spectrum of decreasing political awareness, is the “Nature of the Times” group (Lewis-Beck, 2008). These are the citizens who vote based on the environment they are in or remember themselves being in. For example, they base their voting decisions on whether or not a certain party’s candidate served them well in the past. Their opinions aren’t necessarily rooted in any sort of specific policy considerations. The last, and most uninformed group, the, “Absence of
Issue Content’ members, are those who exhibit no understanding of issue substance. This group bases their decisions off of personal qualities of the candidates, or sometimes based on criteria that are devoid of anything related to politics.

Only 9% of American citizens are ideologues and just 16% are near-ideologues, the rest of America falls squarely into the less informed categories of group benefits, nature of the times, and absence of issue content members. (Lewis-Beck, 2008). Only about one-quarter of American citizens, in other words, can be reasonably considered to make political decisions based explicitly on ideological or policy-related information. While political scientists debate how much knowledge is necessary for citizens to be able to make good decisions, it is important to understand that when citizens are making these decisions, they are doing so with little factual or policy-related information on which to base their decisions.

This invariably leads to the question, given that most citizens do not know much about politics, or cannot conceptualize politics in terms of ideological preferences, how are they making decisions? The answer comes from a process known as heuristic judgment. In what appears to be an adaptive trait, humans have an ability to make judgments in a short period of time, making use of limited amounts of factual information. This ability to make a rapid decision is done through the use of mental shortcuts, otherwise known as heuristics. Generally, people have two motivations when making a decision; first to make an accurate one, and second, to make that decision quickly. In order to do this, people commonly rely on a theory of connectionism, which translates information into decisions. This helps individuals to decrease the cognitive burden on their brain (Shah & Oppenheimer, 2008). “Heuristics diminish the work of retrieving and storing information in memory; streamlining the decision making process by reducing the amount of integrated information necessary in making the choice or passing
judgment” (Dietrich, 2010, pg. 2; Shah & Oppenheimer, 2008).

The mental ability to create shortcuts is thought to have been transcended through evolution. In the prehistoric days of the cavemen, the ability to make snap judgments could often mean the difference between life and death (Abramson, 2008). Thus using heuristics is likely a process learned through evolution, that has become hardwired into our brains. Neuroimaging studies on the brain have, in that same vein, proved that the amygdala, the part of the brain that is responsible for “tracking potential harm”, is involved in trust evaluations, which backs up this notion that we have been hardwired to make rapid judgments (Abramson, 2008). This “rapid detection of trustworthiness may be essential for survival”, and the idea of quick, limited-information decision making has become part of our everyday life (Abramson, 2008, pg. 1).

When it comes specifically to politics, it is true that heuristics conserve a person’s time and mental energy. For voters, an incredibly time-intensive task becomes simple, as citizens do not need to consider lots of policy information to make decisions, but can rather make them quickly, based on little pieces of information that most citizens do possess (DiDonato, 2010). Research has found that heuristics in one form or another are relied upon by almost every type of citizen, whether highly informed or not (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001).

It is thus important to understand which heuristics are most valuable. Perhaps the most utilized is party identification (Schaffner & Streb, 2002). It’s hard to find an election where party identification of the candidates is not associated with their name. In many polling locations, voters even have the option to vote straight party tickets. They can click a button and they won’t even have to see the names of all the candidates, they just accept that they will be voting for anyone listed under their chosen party. In the mind of voters, when they are trying to
reach a quick decision, party identification remains a very good indicator of which candidate they will vote for. Even for a low-information voter who understands only the very basic core values of a party, they know that when they cast their ballot, they will vote for those who align with their beliefs, and most likely, that person is going to be someone from within their identified party. Indeed, “nearly every theory of voting in the American politics literature includes party identification as a critical…factor explaining vote choice” (Schaffner & Streb, 2002, pg. 559).

Another prominent heuristic is the ‘authority’ heuristic. This shortcut is based off of whether or not a candidate is endorsed by someone who the voter perceives to have power, or authority (Allen & Wilson, 2010). Take for example, McCain’s recent endorsement of potential Republican Presidential Nominee Mitt Romney. If a voter has little information about Mitt Romney when voting, they might select him as their ballot choice because they like McCain. They perceive McCain to be in a position of authority where his opinions are important and trustworthy, and will therefore base their judgments on his. In short, their cognitive process might proceed as follows, “I like John McCain. He knows a lot. McCain endorsed Romney. Therefore, I too will probably like Romney.” We find that, “researchers [have] determined that the obedience to authority heuristic had a profound influence on respondents’ decision-making” (Wilhelm, 2012, pg. 8).

Yet, while heuristics influence nearly everyone’s decision, it is low-information voters for whom they tend to be most important for because, as we would expect, they don’t know much about the candidates or their policy stances themselves. Research into the topic has divulged that low-information voters, such as the “Absence of Issue Content” voters mentioned above, will be more likely to rely upon “affect-driven heuristics”—put more simply, they will bely on basic “gut level” reactions to candidates (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008). Affect driven
heuristics are more emotionally based decisions, based largely off of intuition. For example, a voter of this sort might make a political decision based on whether they like the sound of a candidate’s voice, whether their political ads were emotionally stimulating, or whether they think the candidate “looks the part” of a political leader.

In looking towards real world applications of heuristics, research has found that in low-information elections, or elections that weren’t highly publicized, where little to no campaigning was done, party identifications weren’t on the ballots, and where voters knew little to nothing about candidates prior to voting, voters were inclined to make their decisions based off of assumed perceptions of the candidates as deciphered through mental shortcuts. One particular study looked at elections in Britain where photographs were placed on the ballot next to each candidate. The results showed that in low-information elections, implied inferences about the candidates based on cues not directly related to politics, such as attractiveness, race, or age, had strongest effects on election outcomes (Banducci et al., 2008). “Voters tend to be ill informed about candidate and party positions on issues”, but these voters try to “compensate for a lack of information by using cognitive shortcuts in making voting decisions” (Banducci et al., pgs. 903-904, 2008).

If citizens are relying so heavily on mental shortcuts and cues instead of making decisions based on policy or other information, is that a bad thing? Well, that might depend on how “rational” one believes decisions can be. Studies have shown that many people (one study claimed up to 75%) do vote “rationally”, with “rationally” meaning that those who voted made a decision that approximates one that would have been made if “full” information was both available and considered (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001). Researchers contend that the “rationality” of these findings is still due to the use of cognitive heuristics. They assert that citizens are “quite
adept” at using mental shortcuts to make “reasonable decisions” without much cognitive effort (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001). “It is not just in politics that people are faced with making decisions with far less than full information, and it is only reasonable to assume that people will apply to politics the same information shortcuts they have learned to use throughout life” (Lau & Redlawsk, 2001, pg. 952). So we find that heuristics are an incredibly important tool utilized by most people, and given that one finds these rapidly made decisions are the same judgments people would have made if they been exposed to “full” information, it would seem likely that one could evaluate low-information voter’s decisions as being both rational and appropriate. So even in the face of the knowledge that voters do not know much about the political landscape, there are still reasons to think that citizens aren’t making wrong decisions. By using snap judgments, even based on qualities that are not the most reliable nor sophisticated, heuristics provide some hope that voters can, in fact, get it right. Of course, it is also possible for voters to rely on information that has little bearing to how a candidate will actually perform once in office.
Chapter 4
Appearance and Politics

While most research on heuristic judgments in politics has typically focused on explicitly political heuristics (such as party identification), more recent research has highlighted the fact that some citizens use the appearance of candidates as a way to make judgments as well. When electing someone into office, voters are attempting to pick the person who will do the best job, and “because character is, for a great part, inferred from appearance, [researchers] may be on to something when they suggest candidate appearance is one of the most important political heuristics, relied upon widely by uninformed voters” (DiDonato, 2010). This is a finding that should come as no surprise. In the course of day to day lives, evaluating someone’s appearance is one judgment that takes very little mental capacity, and almost no conscious thought. To determine whether or not one likes someone’s personality, their beliefs or their take on life would require interaction of some sort, some kind of mental taxation. Yet, to merely look at another’s appearance takes no energy at all. One either finds that person appealing, or they do not. Appearances are one of the most simple ways that humans ‘size up’ one another and make snap judgments.

Researchers have put a lot of time and effort into studying this fascinating idea that appearances can affect elections. Appearance can make a difference on many different levels, but it is commonly assumed that those people deemed more “attractive” seem to embody certain characteristics. That is to say, without knowing anything about an individual’s personality, many people make judgments about character and, by extension, their suitability for office from looks alone.

The majority of the prominent research on this topic has substantiated the claim that the
appearance of a candidate has a large affect on competency evaluations and election outcomes. There is both a lab- and real-world basis to think that facial appearance affects citizens’ views of how competent political candidates are, and by extension how well those candidates do in elections. One of the more recent findings of this demonstrated that evaluations of competence of politicians running for office in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate were formed by citizens in mere milliseconds. Subjects in a laboratory experiment who were flashed pictures of two competing candidates in real-world US House and Senate race, sometimes for less than a second, and were asked to decide which pictured person looked “more competent”. The results were astounding. In both cases, subjects’ snap evaluations of which candidate appeared more competent were able to predict, with substantial accuracy, the actual election winner (Todorov et. al., 2005). In the Senate races, subjects’ competence ratings were able to accurately predict the winner 71.6% of the time. In the House race, they predicted winners 66.8% of the time (Todorov et. al., 2005).

This study shows that very quick decisions on facial appearance tends to be particularly important to how candidates are viewed. So what if people were given more time to deliberate? Would that yield different results? Research into this concept of “mulling it over” has found that when subjects are asked to deliberate and reflect on their decisions, they actually often become more inconsistent with real-life decisions. In studies where researchers looked at people’s ability to quickly evaluate “competence” of a political candidate, they found that when subjects were asked to deliberate longer on their choice, they became less able to accurately predict the winner of an election. The study asked a group of people to look at candidate photographs, and make a snap decision on which candidate of the two photos shown to them, looked more “competent”. Another group of people were then shown the pictures and asked to deliberate on their choice.
The results showed those asked to ponder their decision weren’t as able to predict the outcome of the real election than those subjects who were asked to decide after a 250 millisecond flash and 2 second flash of the candidates, respectively (Ballew & Todorov, 2007). Candidates who were asked to give a decision quickly had a 67.3% ability to predict the winner of the real election as opposed to a 60% ability from those who were asked to deliberate (Ballew & Todorov, 2007). “The judgments of participants who were asked to deliberate and make a good judgment were less accurate in predicting the election outcomes and substantially slower than the judgments of participants in the other two conditions” (Ballew & Todorov, 2007, pg. 1).

Why is intuition a more accurate predictor than thorough reflection? As we learned above, our preferences are often formed from automatic processes beyond our awareness. Because we’re trying to give reasons to a decision that we received through non-conscious channels, we try to create justifications for it. And as we start to come up with reasons, “they affect how we feel…[and] ultimately change our attitude” (DiDonato, 2010, pg. 1). In evaluating the facial appearances of political candidates, “forming reasons for our competence judgments shifts our initial impressions without adding any real information, making them less reliable predictors of election outcomes” (DiDonato, 2010, pg. 1). Again, these findings highlight the idea that citizens do make subconscious snap judgments based on peoples’ appearances, and these judgments tend to correlate well with actual electoral success and failure.

The reason for this strong effect of appearance can be attributed in part to the “halo effect.” This is a concept that suggests that the more attractive one is, the better their personality traits are deemed to be—attractive people are often perceived to be more honest, hardworking, and moral than non-attractive people (Lucker, et. al., 1981). Since physical attractiveness is the “most obvious and accessible” characteristic that we can see in others, it makes sense that so
many of our inferences about people come from their surface appearance (Dion, et. al., 1972). Research has shown that not only do people who are most attractive appear more socially desirable than those who are unattractive, but it has also been found that attractive people are more likely to land a prestigious job (Dion, et. al., 1972). Additionally, perceived attractiveness also translates into perceived honesty. Those who are more attractive are typically viewed as more honest than those who are not attractive (Zebrowtiz, et. al.,1996, pg. 1266). Though this study doesn’t relate directly to politics, in a country where two-thirds of citizens distrust the government (Pew Charitable Trusts Survey, 2011), the trait of perceived honesty can go a long way.

Supporting these claims are two recent studies by Rosenberg and colleagues designed to show whether candidate appearance affected voter preferences. In the first study, 80 undergraduate students were asked to evaluate 10 photographs of random men based on six different traits, “likableness, integrity, competence, leadership ability, attractiveness, and congressional demeanor” (Rosenberg, et al., 1986, pg. 113). Their results suggested that the images portrayed by each of the photographs evaluated were “quite reliable”, meaning that of the photographs assessed, each participant seemed to find the same traits in every one (Rosenberg, et al., 1986). They also found from that study that certain photographs “project a distinct congressional demeanor”, meaning that some men give off a strong sense of fitness for public office (Rosenberg, et al., 1986). Their results indicate that photographs do have the ability to create reliable impressions of a person’s character, as well as the ability to relay a substantial amount of “politically relevant information” (Rosenberg, et al., 1986).

In the second study, researchers took 104 participants and presented them with two campaign flyers and asked the respondents to pick which one they would vote for. In this study,
only the three photos that were rated highest for congressional demeanor in the previous study, and the three photos rated lowest for congressional demeanor in the previous study were used. Each flyer was the same format, but each had a different photograph along with a party label and “the candidate’s” stance on several political issues (Rosenberg et al., 1991). Rosenberg et al. always gave out pairs of images where an image that was rated highly in congressional demeanor from the prior study was pitted against an image that was rated poorly. To ensure that the results were based solely on appearance, on each flyer they switched around an image’s party identification (whether they were a Democrat or Republican) as well as changed “the candidate’s” stance on the policy issues stated on the flyer. Each participant was given ten minutes to look over the two campaign flyers that they were given and cast their ballot. The results showed that after controlling for party identification and “the candidate’s” stance on issues, that the men whose photographs had previously rated highly in congressional demeanor won (or received the vote by the study participant) 60% of the time (Rosenberg et al., 1991). These results show that even when a voter is given party affiliation and a candidate’s stance on political issues, voter appearance still has a significant impact on how people act.

Of course, the darker side of appearance-based judgments is that, as we are all aware, looks can be deceiving. Research conducted at Princeton University backs up this claim. In the study, subjects were asked to make “rapid character judgments” about people from their photographs. Upon making the estimations of “good character traits”, the subjects were then told that the photographs of people they had deemed “trustworthy” were actually photos of convicted criminals. Upon learning this new information, the subjects had no difficulty changing their minds about that someone’s perceived “trustworthiness” (Abramson, 2008, pg. 1).

The consequences of these studies for understanding how people make political
judgments is especially important. The Abramson study shows that people have the ability to overcome initial appearance-related biases when given enough accurate information. But the issue with political judgment is that most citizens do not have the time or interest to seek out additional information that would lead them to overcome these biases: in many cases, a candidate’s appearance may be one of the only pieces of information that a voter has. The problem, in other words, is that when you’re a low-information voter and you’re making a split decision, you do not have the necessary information at hand to understand that the person who may have a better appearance, may not have the best character, or might not be the best person for the job.

Low-information voters do not have access or simply do not spend the time looking to weigh the facts, they only use their initial reactions. And again, because snap judgments about appearance tend to be automatic (or implicit), people don’t necessarily have the contextual knowledge they need to overcome their initial judgments. When people encounter new evidence that refutes their ideas that someone is trustworthy, they are willing to accept that information and override initial bias. But the trick is people need to be armed with enough information in order to do so. And when we look at our society of American people today, we find that voters tend to have a general lack of interest in politics and don’t really care about learning about politics. (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Lau & Redlawsk, 2001).

The take home point here, then, is that appearance does matter to voters. It matters a lot. Whether it is an accurate estimation of someone’s character or not is almost beside the point. What matters is how that visual assessment is going, at least at the margins, to affect a candidate’s chances of election.²

² Although there is not much evidence as to when, specifically, appearance started becoming such
What does that mean then for heavier candidates? As has been demonstrated earlier, overweight individuals are strongly associated, not with positive attributions, but with negative ones. If voters so strongly react to appearance in general, what ramifications could that have in terms of the value placed on negative attributes over positive ones? In looking at images of brain scans, it has been found that “perceived negative aspects of a candidate exert a stronger influence than positive aspects” when it comes to making appearance judgments and that “negative motives play a significant role in voter decisions” (Spezio et al., 2008, pg. 345). MRI scans that were conducted to study the topic showed that positive evaluations of candidates didn’t produce any major stimulation within the brain, but that negative evaluations showed strong stimulation in the bilateral insula (Spezio, et al., 2008). The second test performed demonstrated that when subjects were asked to assess real, yet unfamiliar political candidates on four traits, two of which were positive and two of which were negative, the most negative
attributes were the ones that created the most dislike of the candidate (Spezio et al, 2008). What this all means is that perceived negative attributions have the strongest ability to predict election outcomes, or rather to predict who will lose, than positive attributions do.

**Appearance, Weight, and Political Judgment**

How does all of this translate into the political context? We know that all voters, to some extent, use mental shortcuts or heuristics and that the most commonly relied upon one is appearance. We also know that in American society, those who are overweight are seen to be less attractive and to have a less appealing appearance. Therefore, if voters are making decisions based on appearance, and a candidate is overweight, a/k/a who has a worse appearance, then it would stand to reason that an obese candidate would be evaluated more negatively than a normal weight one. In addition, we would expect to find that obesity would be a bigger ‘penalty’ for female than male candidates, because obesity tends to matter more to how women are viewed in other circumstances. Third we would expect that weight-based judgments should matter more for low-information voters, given these voters’ greater reliance on appearance-based heuristics. To boil it down to a simple $A + B = C$ equation, if we know that overweight people are deemed less attractive, and we know that attractiveness of political candidates matters a lot, we would expect to find that overweight political candidates will be rated less positively than candidates who are not overweight.

In this paper so far, I have demonstrated that people who are overweight are not typically seen in a positive light. More often than not, they are associated with negative characteristics, especially when it comes to appearance. Obesity tends to matter more for women than for men and it seems to be particularly salient when it comes to how employers rate potential employees.
And politics is an arena where we, the citizens, are all the prospective employers, how will we rate our potential employees.

In an effort to try and understand how citizens evaluate candidates of varying weight for higher office, the next section will look at a lab experiment that endeavored to isolate degree to which a political candidate’s weight matters to how they are viewed. It will look at the results of an experiment conducted on Bucknell’s campus that asked students to look at and evaluate different potential political candidates for higher office. The experiment will attempt to answer the questions that the literature review conducted and examined above laid out. Specifically the testing will target the main question: how much does weight matter when evaluating candidates for higher office? If it does indeed matter, as the literature seems to indicate it would, then will the data reveal that the bias against the overweight matters more for women than for men? And will it demonstrate that appearance evaluations matter more for people who are less engaged with politics?
Overview of the experiment:

This experiment was conducted to examine whether the weight of a candidate affects public perceptions of his/her suitability for elected office. It evaluated three hypotheses that flowed from the discussion in the first sections of this thesis. First, I expect that heavier candidates will be evaluated less positively by citizens, given America’s general tendency to negatively stereotype overweight individuals. Second, I expect that weight will matter more to the evaluations of female than male candidates, given that obesity matters more societally to how people view women than to how they view men. Third, I expect that the effects of weight on candidate appearance will be greatest for citizens who are not attentive to politics, given that ‘low-information’ voters are more likely to use appearance, rather than policy, when evaluating candidates.

The goal of the experiment was to determine whether students in the Bucknell community held the biases that were expected after reviewing the literature pertinent to the topic. By giving students photographs and biographies of candidates and subsequently asking the respondents to rate the candidates based on several qualities, the object is to ascertain whether the participants will evaluate the overweight photographs less positively.

Procedure:

To test these hypotheses, I conducted an online survey experiment of Bucknell Students. The experiment was designed to see how weight, alongside other factors such as policy beliefs,
affected how positively respondents viewed hypothetical candidates for higher office. The survey created was sent a convenience sample consisting of 72 people in Professor Ellis’ Introduction to American Politics courses, and roughly 100 people in the Alpha Chi Omega Sorority. Each person was invited to participate individually and was sent a unique link to the survey via e-mail. Before the participants were e-mailed with the link, those in Professor Ellis’ American Politics courses were told in class that they would be receiving an e-mail regarding taking this survey in an opportunity for four extra points on their (100 point) midterm. Those in class were also given an alternative extra credit assignment of reading a scholarly paper about how citizens evaluate political candidates and writing a short analysis/critique of that paper if they did not wish to participate in the survey.

After receiving the initial e-mail invitation to participate in the survey, the only other contact that was made specifically with the pool of potential participants was a reminder e-mail, sent out via WebSurveyor one week later, reminding all those who had not yet taken the survey, that they still had a chance to do so.

*Method:*

The survey questioned participants to get a sense of their basic demographic background (such as class year and gender) attempted to gain an understanding of each respondent’s political background. The main part of the survey asked respondents to evaluate the qualifications for four candidates for the US House of Representatives, based on a photograph of the candidate and a short biography of their policy views and qualifications. The biographies, like the candidates, were fictitious, and made up as part of the experiment (though they were written in a way as to make the candidates resemble “real world” political candidates).
The survey proceeded as follows. The first few questions asked were aimed at gaining demographic information about the respondents, as well as, at a basic level, to determine the respondent’s interest level in politics. After these initial four questions, four photographs of the hypothetical candidates for political higher office, along with an individual biography accompanying each picture, were shown one by one. The biographies each included background information on each of the candidates which included where they went to school, their past employment experience, information about their family life, and their stances on key political issues. An example of one such biography can be seen below.

Jerry Edwards has served as a state senator in the State House of Oregon for the past 12 years. Hailing from the state capital of Salem, Oregon, Senator Edwards graduated from Concord High School in 1967. He attended the University of Oregon where he received a degree in Business Administration in 1971. Senator Edwards then went on to obtain his Law Degree from Columbia Law School in 1974, graduating Magna Cum Laude. In 1976, the Senator wed his sweetheart Sally Davis. They have three grown children and seven grandchildren.

Senator Edwards’ main focus during his time in the State House has been spent trying to make Health Care affordable to all state residents. He has sponsored several bills designed to increase the affordability of health care for low-income residents, and has supported tighter regulations on health insurance companies and providers. He is a strong supporter of President Obama’s recent Health Care legislation, and has said that he will vigorously protect the provisions of the health care law if elected to the US House. Edwards has also fought to maintain the rights of women by supporting a variety of pro-choice bills in the Oregon State House, including bills that would make abortion services more accessible and affordable to low-income women. He is a strong advocate of increasing taxes on the wealthy, and has vowed to use increased tax revenue to support education initiatives. On defense issues, Senator Edwards was supportive of President Obama’s troop surge in Iraq, and has been a long-standing advocate for increasing the presence of the United State military overseas. He supports plans to hold suspected terrorists indefinitely without trial if they are deemed to be a threat to U.S. National Security.

Each of these picture/bio combinations was followed by a set of five questions asking respondents to evaluate the candidate on a number of dimensions. The first four questions asked respondents to address how well or not well they thought certain trait words—“moral,”
“competent,” “cares about people like me,” and “able to handle a demanding job”—described the candidate. All of these questions were set to a 1-4 scale, where 1 meant a respondent thought the characteristic described the candidate “not well at all,” and 4 meant they thought it described the candidate “very well.” The closing question of this set of six attempted to gain an overall understanding of the attitude the respondent had towards the political candidate, asking them to rate their overall impression of the candidates on a 1 (very unfavorable) to 10 (very favorable) scale. This question helped to form a picture of how the political candidate was perceived in general.

After the four political candidates and their subsequent questions were asked, a final set of six more questions, aimed at determining respondents’ social and political values, were posed. Two questions—asking for respondents views about ‘newer lifestyles’ and ‘traditional family values’—are commonly asked survey questions that gauge whether or not a respondent is tolerant of people who look and act differently than they do. Two further questions aimed to target respondent’s anti-fat bias. The participants were asked to rate on a spectrum whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements, “Success in life is determined largely by forces outside your own control” and “Some people are overweight because they have no willpower”. These statements are commonly used as part of anti-fat attitudes questionnaires that serve to understand bias towards the overweight. Past research has found them to be important questions in highlighting the mindsets that motivate bias against the obese (Crandall, 1994). The final two questions of the survey ask respondents for their ideological and partisan political views. The full questionnaire is available in the Appendix.

The experimental manipulation of the survey was in varying the weight of the candidates presented to respondents in the photographs. In order to find photographs of faux ‘candidates for
higher office’, and to ensure that a diversity of ages and genders was represented in the candidates for higher office. I used Google search to find images of “old man”, “old woman”, “young man”, and “young woman”. Once I had selected the photographs that seemed best suitable (i.e., dressed professionally and only head shots pictured against a bland background), I used a photograph program called *Gimp*, similar to that of the popular program *Photoshop*. I used *Gimp*’s “distort, Iwarp” filter to “shrink” and “grow” the faces and shoulders of the photos to give each photo an “enlarged” version where the individual looked overweight, and a “shrunken” version, where the candidate appeared to be skinny. I created, in other words, an “overweight” and a “skinny” version of each of the four headshots.

I then divided the headshots such that each respondent received two “overweight” candidates and two “skinny” candidates to evaluate. The images of the overweight young woman, overweight older man, thin older woman, and thin younger man were put into one survey, version a. Subsequently, the images of the thin young woman, thin older man, overweight older woman, and overweight younger man were put into survey version b.

Every other aspect of the survey remained the same across versions: the ‘overweight’ and ‘skinny’ versions of the same candidate were given the same biography and same qualifications: the only difference between the two versions of the survey was the weight of the candidate being presented. Pictures of the candidates that were used in the experiment are seen in Figures 1-8 below.
Young Woman:

Figure 1

Figure 2

Old Man:

Figure 3

Figure 4
Old Woman:

Young Man:
The experiment was set up in such a way as to try and isolate the effect of weight apart from all the other ways that people could evaluate these candidates. So each of the four candidate’s biographies remained the same whether their photograph was a thin or more overweight picture. The key in the experimental manipulation is ensuring that any differences in how people evaluated the candidates in version a and in version b was due to the picture alone. The images of the candidates needed to be morphed in order to ensure that any potential bias against overweight individuals in the photographs was not due to any other physical reason. In other words, to protect against any other obvious differences in physical appearance and general attractiveness, we needed to make sure that the photographs of the overweight and thin individuals were the same person. The only way to have overweight and thin photographs of the same person was to morph them via photoshopping tools. The faces were also morphed to ensure that the photographs of the faux political candidates in their overweight and thin photographs were sufficiently different, so the difference between obesity and healthy weight would be ascertainable (though not cartoonish) to the naked eye. By leaving every other aspect of the description of candidates constant, and varying only their weight, we can be reasonably certain that any difference in how the “overweight” and “skinny” versions of the candidates presented is due solely to the physical appearance of the candidate, and not due to any other reason.

While I believe this survey held valuable information pertinent to my research topic, I acknowledge that there were shortcomings of this experiment. One of which was the fact that the respondents were drawn from a convenience sample and were not necessarily a true representation of American political voters. The people who took the experiment are younger than the average voter and arguably less engaged that those citizens who are older.
In addition, the data obtained from the survey was asked in an informal, online manner from a hypothetical election. Though I made an effort to make the biographies of the candidates as realistic as possible, it is clear that this experiment was somewhat artificial. To what extent the results would be different in a real-world election is unknown and would require a look at elections where an overweight individual ran against a thinner candidate, and an ensuing interview of the voters about their vote choice, access to which we do not have. However, real world studies have their limits as well: in a real-world election it would be almost impossible to ensure that weight is the only difference between the two candidates that served as the basis for evaluation. The usefulness therefore in creating this type of lab experiment is the ability to control, to the best of our ability, what other conditions and variables are factoring into and perhaps biasing evaluations.

*When and how the experiment was conducted, and how many respondents*

*answered/demographics of respondents:*

The online survey was activated and sent out on February 6th. It was open until the following Tuesday, February 14th. 95 respondents took the survey. Fifty seven of those individuals took Version 1 of the survey, comprising 60% of the total respondents. Thirty eight took Version 2 of the survey. Slightly more women than men were participated in the survey, which makes sense given that a sorority comprised more than half of the potential respondents.
Gender of Survey Respondents (Figure 9)

Most respondents categorized themselves as either Democrat or Republican when asked for their party identification on a three-point scale, and there was a good mix of Democrats comprising 33.7% of the total respondents, Republicans constituting 38.9%, and Independents covering 27.4%.

Party Identification of Respondents (Figure 10)

When asked more specifically for ideology on a seven point scale ranging from very liberal to
very conservative, most participants were found to be somewhere towards the middle of the scale, with a slight lean towards the conservative side.

**Seven-Point Ideological Scale of Respondents (Figure 11)**

![Seven-Point Ideological Scale of Respondents](image)

**General Results:**

A basic look at the “overall” results, ignoring which version of the survey that responds saw, shows some differences in how well these candidates were perceived in general. The old man was evaluated the most positively, followed then by the young man, the young woman, and the old woman. Although there are many factors that might affect what made respondents like one candidate over another, it appears that gender may play a role (as will be discussed later).
Before getting into the evaluation of my hypotheses, it is useful to note that there are several factors that made respondents positively or negatively rate the candidates in general. To illustrate this, in Table 1 below is a multiple regression chart for each of the independent variables that may have impacted the respondent’s overall evaluation of each candidate. These models predicted evaluations toward the each of the four candidates as a function of several demographic and political variables.

Three of the variables, party ideology, and gender, were taken straight from the survey. The other two were scales that I created. My scale of political attentiveness combines responses to questions gauging a respondent’s level of political attentiveness and political interest. Both of these questions were coded on a 1-4 scale, where “1” indicates a respondent who was not interested in politics at all (or followed politics not closely at all), and four indicating that they were very interested (or followed politics very closely). I combined these two questions together into a 1-8 scale measuring how attentive respondents were to politics.

The authoritarianism scale combined the two moral values questions which asked the respondents if they agreed or disagreed with the statements, “newer lifestyles are contributing to
the breakdown of our society” and “this country would have fewer problems if there was more emphasis on traditional family values.” Here, a scale was created for each where one indicated “strongly disagree”, two meaning “disagree”, three meaning “neutral”, four meaning “agree”, and five meaning “strongly agree.” These two questions were recoded into an overarching variable and renamed “Authoritarianism”, as these two statements are often used in surveys attempting to determine levels of authoritarianism (Hetherington and Weiler 2009).

Because of the small sample size and large number of predictors, few results were statistically significant. The only statistically significant information that was gleaned was that political conservatives, as well as those who scored higher on the authoritarianism spectrum, evaluated the “young woman” candidate more positively. Conversely, Democrats evaluated the old man more positively. Both of these results make sense: the young woman was portrayed as a social conservative, while the older man’s biography was written to sound like a (moderate) Democrat’s biography.

Other variables were not statistically significant, though had interesting effects, though no one variable was consistent across all four candidates. Male respondents were more likely to evaluate positively the old woman, the young woman, and the young man overall, but the evaluated the older male less positively. Republicans evaluated the old woman, the young woman, and the old man less positively while Democrats evaluated the young man more positively. Conservatives evaluated the old woman, young woman, and young man well, while the opposite was true for the old man. As attentiveness to politics rose, so did the evaluation of the old woman, the young woman, and the young man. Authoritarians, interestingly, tended to like all of the candidates more than non-authoritarians.

Multiple Regression From Both Versions For Overall Evaluation (Table 1)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Old Woman</th>
<th>Young Woman</th>
<th>Old Man</th>
<th>Young Man</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender (Female)</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>0.388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party</td>
<td>-0.204</td>
<td>-0.153</td>
<td>*-1.045</td>
<td>0.479</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>0.022</td>
<td>*0.807</td>
<td>-0.063</td>
<td>0.386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attentiveness to Politics</td>
<td>0.008</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>-0.209</td>
<td>0.448</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Authoritarianism</td>
<td>0.001</td>
<td>*0.93</td>
<td>0.288</td>
<td>0.145</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Indicates statistically significant at .10 level.
Chapter 6
Evaluation of Hypotheses

Hypothesis #1: Effect of Weight

Results from the survey indicated that the first hypothesis of the paper, that the weight of a political candidate for higher office does in fact matter and that heavier candidates will be viewed less positively than healthy weight candidates, was generally accurate. The below table is mean data derived from IBM SPSS compare means tests, and the significance 2-tailed column is obtained from an independent sample t-test. This table simply compares overall evaluations (measured on a 1-10 scale), for candidates based on whether respondents saw the healthy weight or overweight picture of them.

Mean Scores for Overall Evaluation by Version (Table 2):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Healthy Weight Mean Score</th>
<th>Overweight Mean Score</th>
<th>Healthy Weight - Overweight</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Old Woman</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Woman</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>*0.013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old Man</td>
<td>6.89</td>
<td>6.55</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Man</td>
<td>7.05</td>
<td>6.19</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>*0.026</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Indicates is statistically significant at .10 level

For each of the four candidates, the overweight respondent was viewed more negatively. (although only two of the mean scores for the overall evaluations of each of the candidates proved to be significantly different from one another: that of the young woman and the young man). The mean scores for each of the overweight versions of the candidate were always lower by at least a .34 difference.
Overall Evaluation Mean Scores by Version (Figure 13):

We see similar results when we look at not just the overall evaluation, but all of the other questions on which respondents were asked to evaluate candidates. In general, there is clear evidence that the overweight candidate was evaluated less positively on average than the healthy weight candidate.

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4 The lines running vertically through the bars on the graph are “error bars,” showing 95% confidence intervals for each of the mean scores. They are useful to illustrate, graphically, the statistical significance of the differences between versions.
Mean comparison test for Candidate Characteristics and Evaluations (Table 3)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Healthy Weight Mean Score</th>
<th>Overweight Mean Score</th>
<th>Healthy Weight - Overweight</th>
<th>P-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Old Woman</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>3.29</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.248</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competent</td>
<td>2.61</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cares</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>-0.25</td>
<td>*0.056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perform</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>*0.010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>4.82</td>
<td>4.42</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Young Woman</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competent</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>*0.045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cares</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>2.82</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>0.855</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perform</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>*0.051</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>*0.011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Old Man</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.881</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competent</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>0.253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cares</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>0.414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perform</td>
<td>3.53</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.823</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>6.89</td>
<td>6.55</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Young Man</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competent</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cares</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perform</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>3.36</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>*0.018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>7.05</td>
<td>6.19</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>*0.026</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Indicates is statistically significant at .10 level

Again, only some of the differences across versions were statistically significant. This may be to be expected, given the small overall sample size that was used in this experiment. But overall trends suggest that in almost every instance, the photographs of the thinner version of the candidate were rated more positively than the overweight photographs. Within the moral, competent, perform (whether or not the candidate could perform a demanding job), and overall variables, it was the case more often than not that the healthy weight version of the candidate was rated more favorably. These positive attributions given to the healthy weight photograph
over the overweight photograph are in line with that the review of the literature indicated might occur. Given that in other studies noted the multitude of negative traits that are often attributed to the overweight, these results should come as no surprise. Especially when it comes to the competent and ability to perform a demanding job qualities. Previous research directly linked the perceived competency of a candidate to their perceived attractiveness. It therefore makes sense that the thinner candidate, aka the more attractive one, would receive this higher competency rating. The ability to perform a demanding job variable too, is fitting with the impression that most Americans have that says those who are overweight are lazy (Crandall, 1994). The ability to perform a demanding job goes hand in hand with enthusiasm and energy, the polar opposite of the trait “lazy”.

Yet while most of the survey variables were more positively associated with the thinner candidates, this was not found to be true for every variable. The “cares” variable, measured how well the respondent felt the candidate “cared about people like [them]” on a scale from “very well” to “does not describe this candidate well at all”, proved to be the outlier. The “cares” variable actually found that in three of the four candidates, the overweight version of the candidate was described as caring about the respondent more than the thin one. In the one case where this was not true, the margin of difference between the mean scores of the healthy and overweight candidates was only a .01 difference.

Hypothesis #2: Intersection of Gender and Weight

When it came to the hypothesis that weight would matter more for women than for men, the data from the survey returned ambiguous results. It should first be noted that both of the women’s mean scores were substantially lower than both of the men’s scores, as can be seen in
Figure 12 shown in the general results section. Though this could be attributable to reasons other than gender (e.g., the biographies of the candidates), it is nevertheless important to note that female candidates were rated less favorably.  

However, when trying to ascertain how much weight mattered to different evaluations of women and men, the data revealed no genuine consistencies. In Table 3, in order for the hypothesis that gender will matter to be correct, we would have had to have found bigger discrepancies between the subtracted male’s scores and the subtracted female’s scores. In other words, to prove the hypothesis correct, the numerical difference between the overall evaluation of the healthy weight and overweight females would have had to have been larger than the males were. This simply not the case. The results ended up demonstrating a mix where the old woman’s difference (on the overall evaluation score) was 0.4, the young woman’s was 0.94, the old man’s was 0.34, and the young man’s was 0.86. This data would actually seem to indicate that perhaps age was more of a factor than was weight, as the differences were most stark for the young man and woman as compared to the older man and woman.

Ultimately, the data from this survey did not find support for this the hypothesis. However, neither does the data definitely say that it does not. Further research, perhaps more targeted on this hypothesis specifically, should be conducted in order to accurate validate or reject this claim.

Although not discussed in previous the research that preceded in this thesis, it is interesting to note that when the overall evaluation mean scores were broken down by gender, both the males and the females preferred the male candidates over either of the female candidates. There was no in-group bias evident among the female gender, both men and women preferred the male candidates.
**Hypothesis #3: Engagement Levels on Weight Importance**

The third hypothesis that was tested looked to determine whether respondents who were less engaged in politics would be more influenced by the overweight appearance of the candidates. The data that resulted from the questions that targeted this hypothesis can be seen below. To make comparisons simple, I divided respondents into two categories, based on their responses to the “interest in politics” and “follow politics” question. To begin, I combined the responses to these two questions into a single scale, as described above. I then divided respondents into two groups, based on whether their scores on this scale were above (or at) or below average for the entire sample. The end result is two groups: one who I consider to have “above average” attentiveness, and one who I consider to have “below average” attentiveness.

*Overall Evaluations for respondents Who Had Above Average Political Attentiveness Based on Version (Figure 14)*

![Graph showing overall evaluations for respondents with above average political attentiveness](image-url)
Overall Evaluation for respondents Who Had Below Average Political Attentiveness Based on Version (Figure 15)

These graphs indicate that, in general, both highly attentive and poorly attentive citizens preferred the thinner candidate photograph. What actually shows the how much the level of engagement matters, is in determining how much of a difference there was between the evaluations of the healthy and overweight candidate based on engagement level: whether, in other words, weight mattered more to the evaluations of the less attentive respondents. In order to decode this, I generated a mean difference measure that subtracted the “overweight mean” from the “healthy weight mean” for both below average and above average respondents.
Differences Between the “Healthy Weight” and “Overweight” evaluations of Each Candidate for Below and Above Average Attentiveness Levels (Figure 16)

What was deciphered when looking at the difference in mean scores for healthy and overweight candidates as broken down by engagement level was that for only two of the candidates, the young woman and the young man, weight seem to matter more for the less attentive group. Both groups of participants gave the thinner candidates a better overall evaluation, but for the below average respondents, that difference between healthy and overweight evaluations was a lot larger. These differences are statistically significant: for both of these candidates, we can say with confidence that weight mattered more to the evaluations of less attentive respondents than more attentive respondents.

The opposite effects appear to be true, at least to some extent, for the older woman and older man, where weight appeared to matter more for the more attentive than the less attentive. But these differences were not statistically significant. Thus, the hypothesis that the weight of a candidate would matter more for lower engaged participants, although not proved without a
doubt, appears to have some support: to the extent that attentiveness matters at all, it appears to matter in a way that exaggerates the importance of weight compared to other factors.

General Observations:

The results of this research survey were not without ambiguity. Due to the limited number of respondents, it was difficult to ascertain differences that were statistically significant. However, the experiment did at least suggest that the weight of the candidate matters. The mean evaluations for the overweight candidates was less than the mean score of the healthy weight candidate in almost all cases (and with respect to all four “overall evaluation” variables), even if not all differences were statistically significant. The majority of the mean scores in these other characteristics, in other words, tended to illustrate higher mean scores again for the healthy weight candidate rather than the overweight candidate, except when it came to how likely the candidate was to care about the respondent.

The results of the survey provided less support for the veracity of weight mattering more for women than for men. Overall evaluation scores were not as reliable in determining whether the women overall were appraised more low than the male candidates, as they were in determining the other hypotheses. Lastly, the results showed that respondents who had above average political attentiveness, which is to say that they more closely follow and have a stronger interest in politics than others, appeared to be less influenced by the weight of a candidate when making their judgments.

Unfortunately, there were elements of the unrealistic that were apparent in this study. In real world scenarios, candidates and their images would most likely be seen by voters on more than one occasion. The impact of a recurring image on how the voter responds to a photograph
was not tested and it is possible that after more than one exposure, initial bias might be overcome with other information. Simply put, the election process in the real world works much differently than the structure that was given to respondents during this survey. For that matter, the experiment was artificial in many ways. Additionally, the experiment also lacked real world applications due to the nature of the people who were surveyed at Bucknell. Since the respondent demographics were limited to males and females ages 18-24 who attend Bucknell University, there assumably would be a few differences between this category of potential voters and the average American voter. First of all, the group sampled was right on the cusp of voting age, whereas the average American voter is roughly age 44 (Shribman, 2008). This might lead to a different set of considerations in terms of selecting who would best serve you in office, perhaps this could have contributed to why the younger candidates from the survey were rated more favorably on average than the older candidates. The fact that the respondents for the experiment attended Bucknell University also indicates that they have attained higher level of education, were more likely to be a non-Hispanic white, and to be in a higher income bracket, however all of this information is also fitting of the trends of the average voter (Census Bureau, 2010). So in that regard, aside from age, the respondents of this survey were similar to a typical voter. The question of whether or not this experiment would extrapolate out into the real world is an excellent point, but this research attempted to discern at a basic level if there would be any type of anti-fat bias. In understanding that it did, I believe it provides an indication that at least some types of voters, and the makeup of the Bucknell respondents is not necessarily that much different from the average one, take weight into consideration when they are casting their ballot.

This experiment was not perfect but I believe that it did make a case that weight, within the larger theme of appearance in politics, does matter. The survey showed that heaviness of a
candidate can influence a voter’s perception of that candidate, and influence that perception in a negative way. This is becoming increasingly important in a country where obesity is on the rise. This survey lays groundwork for perhaps a larger and more thorough study into the effects of weight in politics. There is a lot of variables within this dataset that could be built upon and used to enhance understanding of political behavior. This experiment adds yet another layer to this complex topic, especially within that subcategory of appearance’s influence on decisions.
Chapter 7
Conclusions

The experiment conducted helps to make the first steps toward understanding weight’s effect on political behavior. Although it had its limitations, and further research would need to be done to prove with greater accuracy the findings of the data in this thesis, the experiment aided in showing that weight does matter. It demonstrated that the weight of a candidate can affect not only their overall evaluation ratings, but also the evaluation of their character. It also showed that when those who are less attentive to politics are more likely to rely on appearance based inferences than those who have greater knowledge of the issues. And although ambiguous, the conclusion of the data may also point in the direction that the gender of the overweight candidate, and evaluations based on appearance, may favor men over women. In addition, the data suggested another idea that could be explored further in additional research: how the factor of age, and age intersecting with weight, plays into how much appearance matters to political decisions.

It is important to understand however, the context in which this experiment can be placed in with other factors that may determine election outcomes. How does appearance stack up with placed alongside issues such as ideology and the economy, two extremely important influencers in political decision making. In the aggregate, it is implausible to think that appearance of a candidate would be the deciding factor in an election outcome. Yet, that does not mean it would not matter at the margins. For those voters who do not have anything else to base their decision off of, appearance might be the one tool they have at their disposal. And when some elections can come as close as the difference between 537 votes out of 5,962,657 a mere 0.00901% percent of the vote, as was the case in the 2000 Presidential election between Al Gore and
George W. Bush, then all these seemingly insignificant factors start possibly meaning the difference between winning and losing (Federal Election Commission, 2000).

The insight and conclusions drawn from both the experiment and the literature review as to the pervasiveness of the stigma that accompanies obesity proved, at least to some extent, how much of an issue this is in American culture and society. I think this thesis shows a different approach to how voters make decisions, within the broader context of appearance-based heuristics. Finally, although the experiment data was not as substantive as I was seeking, I believe the overall thesis considers and analyzes a topic that has not been comprehensively considered in the political or obesity study communities, and helps to bridge the gap between those who study obesity and its consequences with those who study how voters make political decisions. In particular, these results and hypotheses add another dimension to the ways in which we might consider obese people to be stigmatized: in perceptions of their suitability for higher office. Further, I believe this thesis adds a new dimension to politics by bringing to light the fact that obesity is an issue that permeates not just political policy—in terms of discrimination laws that may or may not protect the obese—but also the election process itself.
References

Abramson, Anna. "In Faces We Trust." *Greater Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life.* University of California, Berkeley, Fall 2008.

<http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/in_faces_we_trust/>.


Appendix

Survey Request Sent To Participants:
My name is Kennedy Costantino and I am a senior here at Bucknell! I am conducting research, in conjunction with Professor Ellis in the Political Science department, regarding perceptions of political candidates. The study is attempting to understand how people evaluate the qualifications of candidates for higher office. This e-mail invites you to participate in this survey.

If you choose to participate, the survey should take approximately ten minutes. Your participation in this research will be completely confidential. Neither Professor Ellis nor I will know how you personally answered any of the questions. If you do not want to participate in this survey, you do not have to.

If you have any questions about the experiment or your possible participation, you may contact me at kac042@bucknell.edu. If you have any questions about the rights of human participants in research, you may contact Professor Feuerstein, Chair of the Institutional Review Board, at afeuerstein@bucknell.edu or 570-577-3293.

To participate in the survey, please click the link that appears below! Thank you for your help!
http://websurveyor.bucknell.edu/1.dll/JGsA5C694F91WZD9U18552J.htm.

Copy of the Survey (Version 1):

WELCOME PAGE:

This survey aims to look at how citizens evaluate the qualifications of candidates for political office. It will take approximately ten minutes to answer all of the questions. You (the subject) will first need to answer a few questions about your background and then you will be asked to evaluate pictures of political candidates.

We cannot explain all of the details of the experiment to you at this time, but they will be explained fully at the conclusion of the experiment.

All of your answers will be kept confidential. The data is anonymous and will not be linked to you in any way or used for purposes other than this research experiment. Your participation in this research is voluntary and refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Should you chose to discontinue participation at any time, you will receive no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you have any questions about whom to contact for questions related to this research, please contact Kennedy Costantino at Kac042@bucknell.edu. If you have any questions regarding research subjects’ rights and research-related injury, please contact Dr. Abe Feuerstein, Chair, IRB at 570-577-3293.
In pressing ‘Continue’ below, you are affirming that you consent to participate in this study and that you are 18 years of age or older.”

First, we have few questions related to your political background.

What is your class year?
- First year
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Other

Which of the following best describes your level of interest in American politics?
- Very interested
- Somewhat interested
- Not very interested
- Not at all interested

How closely would you say that you follow news on politics and public affairs in the United States?
- Very closely
- Somewhat closely
- Not very closely
- Not at all closely?

What is your gender? (OPEN-ENDED QUESTION)
Now, we would like to get your views on the qualifications of candidates for the United States House of Representatives. Below you will find a brief biography of each of the candidates. After each biography, you will be asked to answer a short series of questions regarding your views of each candidate.

Elizabeth Anya is a candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives in Oregon. Senator Anya is originally from Portland, Washington and attended South Portland High School. She received a Bachelor’s degree in English literature from Stanford University in 1980. She then went on to receive her Masters in Business Administration from Duke in 1986, and her Law Degree, also from Duke, in 1989. After graduation, Anya moved to Washington State, working as a corporate lawyer for PEMCO (an insurance firm) until 2001. In 2001, she joined the Bush Administration as the Special Counsel to United States Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Senator Anya is married with three children, and currently is a consultant for the housing and insurance industries. She resides in Portland, Oregon and Washington, DC.

Anya’s primary areas of expertise are in economic regulation, particularly of the housing and insurance industries. She strongly opposes financial reform designed to more closely regulate the activities of these industries, arguing that she has seen how regulation stifles innovation and costs jobs in these fields. She has also taken an interest in defense issues, supporting the war in Iraq and calling for a larger, more permanent American presence in the Middle East. On social issues, she is a strong advocate of pro-life policies and is supportive of efforts to encourage more traditional family lifestyles.

In general, how qualified would you say that this candidate is for service in the U.S. House of Representatives?
- Very qualified
-Not very qualified
-Somewhat qualified
-Not at all qualified

Below are a list of words and phrases people may use to describe political figures. Please tell me how well this word or phrase describes this candidate. (All scales: describes this candidate very well; somewhat well, not very well, does not describe this candidate well at all.

-Moral
  -Very well
  -Somewhat well
  -Not very well
  -Does not describe this candidate well at all

-Competent
  -Very well
  -Somewhat well
  -Not very well
  -Does not describe this candidate well at all

-Cares about people like me
  -Very well
  -Somewhat well
  -Not very well
  -Does not describe this candidate well at all

-Able to perform a demanding job
  -Very well
  -Somewhat well
  -Not very well
  -Does not describe this candidate well at all

On a 10-point scale, where one means “very unfavorable” and 10 means “very favorable,” what is your overall impression of this candidate?
  -(1-10, with endpoints labeled)
Jerry Edwards has served as a state senator in the State House of Oregon for the past 12 years. Hailing from the state capital of Salem, Oregon, Senator Edwards graduated from Concord High School in 1967. He attended the University of Oregon where he received a degree in Business Administration in 1971. Senator Edwards then went on to obtain his Law Degree from Columbia Law School in 1974, graduating Magna Cum Laude. In 1976, the Senator wed his sweetheart Sally Davis. They have three grown children and seven grandchildren.

Senator Edwards’ main focus during his time in the State House has been spent trying to make Health Care affordable to all state residents. He has sponsored several bills designed to increase the affordability of health care for low-income residents, and has supported tighter regulations on health insurance companies and providers. He is a strong supporter of President Obama’s recent Health Care legislation, and has said that he will vigorously protect the provisions of the health care law if elected to the US House. Edwards has also fought to maintain the rights of women by supporting a variety of pro-choice bills in the Oregon State House, including bills that would make abortion services more accessible and affordable to low-income women. He is a strong advocate of increasing taxes on the wealthy, and has vowed to use increased tax revenue to support education initiatives. On defense issues, Senator Edwards was supportive of President Obama’s troop surge in Iraq, and has been a long-standing advocate for increasing the presence of the United States military overseas. He supports plans to hold suspected terrorists indefinitely without trial if they are deemed to be a threat to U.S. National Security.

In general, how qualified would you say that this candidate is for service in the U.S. House of Representatives?

- Very qualified
- Not very qualified
- Somewhat qualified
- Not at all qualified
Below are a list of words and phrases people may use to describe political figures. Please tell me how well this word or phrase describes this candidate. (All scales: describes this candidate very well; somewhat well, not very well, does not describe this candidate well at all.

-Moral
  -Very well
  -Somewhat well
  -Not very well
  -Does not describe this candidate well at all

-Competent
  -Very well
  -Somewhat well
  -Not very well
  -Does not describe this candidate well at all

-Cares about people like me
  -Very well
  -Somewhat well
  -Not very well
  -Does not describe this candidate well at all

-Able to perform a demanding job
  -Very well
  -Somewhat well
  -Not very well
  -Does not describe this candidate well at all

On a 10-point scale, where one means “very unfavorable” and 10 means “very favorable,” what is your overall impression of this candidate? -(1-10, with endpoints labeled)
Jackie Smith is a candidate for the House of Representatives in the state of Michigan. She grew up in Saginaw Michigan, and earned a Bachelor’s Degree in Political Science from the University of Detroit Mercy in 1974. She earned a Master’s Degree in Social Work from Michigan State University in 1978. Jackie Smith is married to Michael Smith, a Common Pleas judge, and they have two daughters, Jaclyn, 27 and McKenzie, 25. They currently reside in Dearborn, Michigan. After spending several years as a stay-at-home mother to her two children, Smith worked as an editorial assistant for the University of Michigan Press, and later as a counselor in a program designed to help at-risk teens in the Dearborn area. Most recently, she has served as a counselor for a program designed to help older citizens transition to life in assisted-living facilities.

Smith’s campaign is dedicated to fighting on behalf of seniors, from her seat on the Aging Committee. Smith has vowed to fight to make health insurance more affordable, to increase funding for Medicare, to make long-term care for seniors more affordable. She has also vowed to tighten national regulations on the nursing home industry, working to strengthen safety protections for residents and employees of nursing homes and increasing the mental health assistance available for seniors who live in such homes. She is in favor of increasing taxes, particularly on wealthy citizens, to pay for such initiatives. On social issues, representative Smith is supportive of the traditional definition of marriage as being ‘between a man and a woman,’ and has sought to make adoption and anti-abortion counseling more available to pregnant women.
In general, how qualified would you say that this candidate is for service in the U.S. House of Representatives?

- Very qualified
- Not very qualified
- Somewhat qualified
- Not at all qualified

Below are a list of words and phrases people may use to describe political figures. Please tell me how well this word or phrase describes this candidate. (All scales: describes this candidate very well; somewhat well, not very well, does not describe this candidate well at all.)

- Moral
  - Very well
  - Somewhat well
  - Not very well
  - Does not describe this candidate well at all

- Competent
  - Very well
  - Somewhat well
  - Not very well
  - Does not describe this candidate well at all

- Cares about people like me
  - Very well
  - Somewhat well
  - Not very well
  - Does not describe this candidate well at all

- Able to perform a demanding job
  - Very well
  - Somewhat well
  - Not very well
  - Does not describe this candidate well at all

On a 10-point scale, where one means “very unfavorable” and 10 means “very favorable,” what is your overall impression of this candidate?

-(1-10, with endpoints labeled)
Mark Mitchell is a candidate for the House of Representatives in the state of Michigan. Mitchell grew up in Marion, Ohio, and attended Yale University where he graduated Summa Cum Laude in 1985. Mitchell went on to receive his Masters of Business Administration and Ph.D in Engineering Systems from George Washington University. Mitchell has worked in a number of positions in the energy industry, serving as a staff engineer and manager with several petrochemical and natural gas companies. He has also served as a consultant to local and state governments on energy issues. He currently serves as Chief Executive Officer of a small natural gas firm based in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The Congressman is married to his childhood sweetheart, Eileen, and the two have three children.

Mitchell is strongly opposed to President Obama’s healthcare plan, and has been vocal advocate for deep budget cuts on domestic programs, particularly in the areas of welfare and Medicare. He has advocated elimination of the capital gains tax, and has suggested that individuals be allowed to invest some of their Social Security contributions in private investment accounts. He is strongly supportive of oil and natural gas exploration and drilling both on land and offshore. On social issues, he is opposed to gay marriage, but supports the rights of gays and lesbians to form civil unions. He has not taken a position on abortion, saying that the decision is best made ‘by a woman and her doctor.’
In general, how qualified would you say that this candidate is for service in the U.S. House of Representatives?
- Very qualified
- Not very qualified
- Somewhat qualified
- Not at all qualified

Below are a list of words and phrases people may use to describe political figures. Please tell me how well this word or phrase describes this candidate. (All scales: describes this candidate very well; somewhat well, not very well, does not describe this candidate well at all.

-Moral
- Very well
- Somewhat well
- Not very well
- Does not describe this candidate well at all

-Competent
- Very well
- Somewhat well
- Not very well
- Does not describe this candidate well at all

-Cares about people like me
- Very well
- Somewhat well
- Not very well
- Does not describe this candidate well at all

-Able to perform a demanding job
- Very well
- Somewhat well
- Not very well
- Does not describe this candidate well at all

On a 10-point scale, where one means “very unfavorable” and 10 means “very favorable,” what is your overall impression of this candidate?
-(1-10, with endpoints labeled)
Now, we just have a few more questions related to your social and political values.

Below are a few statements regarding society in general. For each, please tell us how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement. (All questions on strongly agree-strongly disagree scale.)

-Success in life determined largely by forces outside your own control
  -Strongly Agree
  -Agree
  -Neutral
  -Disagree
  -Strongly Disagree

Some people are overweight because they have no willpower
  -Strongly Agree
  -Agree
  -Neutral
  -Disagree
  -Strongly Disagree

-Newer lifestyles are contributing to the breakdown of our society.
  -Strongly Agree
  -Agree
  -Neutral
  -Disagree
  -Strongly Disagree

-This country would have fewer problems if there was more emphasis on traditional family values.
  -Strongly Agree
  -Agree
  -Neutral
  -Disagree
  -Strongly Disagree

Here is a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven’t you thought much about this? (1-7 scale, with endpoints labeled 1: ‘very liberal’; ‘7’ very conservative)
-Finally, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or a member of some other party?
  -Republican
  -Democrat
  -Other Party
  -Don’t Know
DEBRIEF PAGE:

The purpose of this experiment was to determine if candidates for political office who are overweight are evaluated less positively than candidates who appear to be of normal weight. The images and biographies that you viewed were of hypothetical candidates for higher office. For each candidate, you were shown either their actual image, or a digitally morphed image that made them appear to be overweight. This experiment was designed to gauge whether candidates that appeared overweight would be viewed more negatively than candidates who did not appear overweight.

Since many factors affect how people evaluate political candidates, the other political questions were asked to see the role that these factors (such as your ideology, or your party affiliation)

All of your responses to this survey will remain anonymous: your specific answers will never be traced back to you. If you would like to submit your answers, please select the ‘Submit’ button below. If you would like to withhold your data you may choose to do so without penalty by simply closing this window.