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# Exploring the Association between Israeli Legislators' Physical Attractiveness and Their Television News Coverage

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## Abstract

This study develops and tests the hypothesis that physically attractive politicians receive more news coverage. The physical attractiveness of Members of the 16th Israeli Knesset (MKs) was assessed by students abroad, who did not know they were evaluating Israeli politicians. The number of times each member appeared on national television news at the time of study was obtained and used as a measure of television news coverage. Multivariate analysis demonstrated that, over and above controls for a host of factors, the physical attractiveness of the MKs was associated with their coverage in television news.

## Keywords

news gathering, journalism, Parliament

The amount of coverage a legislator receives in the news media is a key element in shaping his or her political success. Legislators use the news media to influence their counterparts and obtain their cooperation in getting legislation passed (Cook 1986; Kedrowski 1996; Sellers 2000; Wawro 2000). News coverage is also an essential factor because most voters obtain their knowledge about their representatives and their activity from the news media (Arnold 2004). Given that news coverage promotes public awareness and knowledge, it also helps shape political outcomes (Clarke and Evans 1983), and thus legislators' news coverage was found to be a predictor of their electoral success (Sheafer 2007).

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But what factors shape legislators' news media coverage? Previous research tells us that the frequency and amount of coverage legislators receive is determined to a large extent by the characteristics of the media covering the representative, such as the congruence between the media market and the congressional district (Vinson 2003) and the resources that newspapers can spend on congressional coverage (Arnold 2004). Actor-centered explanations have traditionally emphasized the role of legislators' political power and factors such as their seniority and tenure in parliament, but also their parliamentary activity, in shaping their coverage (Arnold 2004; Cook 1986; Hess 1986; Squire 1988). More recent research has noted the role of individual-level factors such as legislators' media skills and charisma (Sheafer 2001; Sheafer and Wolfsfeld 2004) and media motivations (Cohen et al. 2008; Vinson 2003). Past research was able to explain only a limited amount of the variance in the coverage received by legislators in an institution, demonstrating that many factors shaping coverage were previously ignored. The present exploration inquires whether the coverage received by members of parliament is shaped not only by their hierarchical position in the power system, their media talent, and the efforts they invest in obtaining coverage, but also by their physical attractiveness.

The importance assigned by politicians to their physical appearance is attested to by a variety of anecdotes. It is well known that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu travels everywhere with a makeup kit, in case he happens to find himself in the vicinity of a television camera (see Peri 2004). Former U.S. President Nixon once offered Senator Ted Kennedy advice on how to make a serious run for the presidency: "Lose twenty pounds" (Postman, 1986: 4). The political significance of physical attractiveness in the age of the Internet and television, when the whereabouts of public figures can be broadcast instantly to wide audiences, is also underscored by political consultants (e.g., Brown 1994; Reid 2004; Rimon 1992), some of whom even specialize in grooming the looks of political candidates (Brown 1994). The fact that candidates spend substantial resources on the services of such consultants also demonstrates the importance of physical attractiveness in political life.

Media scholar Neil Postman (1986) has long ago asserted that current media systems pay more attention to politicians' cosmetics than to their substantive arguments when selecting their interviewees (for more on the importance on physical appearance and other visual aspects in politics, see e.g., Grabe and Bucy 2009; Meyer 2002). However, the role of physical attractiveness in shaping legislators' news coverage was not empirically investigated to date. Hence, we do not know the magnitude of this effect and we cannot assess the contribution of this factor in comparison to other predictors. Therefore, in this exploration, we measured the physical attractiveness of members of the Israeli parliament (the Knesset) and estimated the impact of this variable on the frequency of their appearances in TV news.

## **The Attractiveness Effect**

The underlying assumption of the current exploration is that, like other human beings, journalists are attracted to good-looking people. Etcoff (1999) argues that people,

regardless of culture or time period, are attracted to beauty and aesthetics. Psychological research demonstrates that physical attractiveness carries with it advantages and benefits in various aspects of life. Beginning in early childhood, attractive babies receive preferred treatment from their parents, and this positive treatment from the environment continues in adulthood (Langlois et al. 2000). Attractive people are more popular and are perceived as having higher social status (Anderson et al. 2001). Various studies demonstrate that attractive people are also perceived by strangers as more socially competent, more potent, and more intelligent (Eagly et al. 1991). The human tendency to assign socially desirable qualities to physically attractive people is called in the psychological literature the “what is beautiful is good” stereotype (Dion et al. 1972), and while there are several qualifications to these positive perceptions (e.g., attractive women are perceived to be more snobbish and materialistic; Dermer and Thiel 1975), the what-is-beautiful-is-good stereotype received support across studies (Eagly et al. 1991).

The attractiveness effect is not limited to impression formation and takes place even when the evaluators know the target personally (Langlois et al. 2000). Attractive people have higher self-esteem, have more friends, get better grades in school, and receive lighter sentences in court (Stewart 1984). Perhaps because they “possess characteristics that dispose them to be more effective communicators” (Chaiken 1979: 1387), attractive people are judged as more trustworthy and are more persuasive (Horai et al. 1974). Probably as a result of these advantages (Judge et al. 2009; Mobius and Rosenblat 2006), the job market tends to perceive attractive people more positively and to treat them better (Hosoda et al. 2003) in terms of hiring decisions, qualification ratings, promotions, and pay. Hamermesh and Biddle (1994) reported that even after controlling for occupation, workers of above-average beauty earn about 10 to 15 percent more than workers of below-average beauty.

The attractiveness effect is manifested in the political sphere as well, and several studies have documented that attractive politicians enjoy greater electoral success (Atkinson et al. 2008; Ballew and Todorov 2007; King and Leigh 2006; Surawski and Ossoff 2006), especially in low-information elections (Banducci et al. 2008) and among those voters who are poorly informed about politics but tend to watch a good deal of television (Lenz and Lawson 2009).

Why do attractive people receive all these benefits? Two main explanations have been offered for the attractiveness effect (Rhodes 2005). According to the first, the evolutionary explanation, attraction to beauty is a universal part of the Darwinist struggle that pushes human beings toward activities that are likely to promote the survival of their genes (Etcoff 1999). Those features to which people are most attracted are often signals of fertility and of healthier genes. For example, facial symmetry and averageness—which are considered physically attractive—are also indicative of parasite-resistant genes, which are preferred because they produce genetically resistant offspring or provide better parental care to the offspring (Grammer and Thornhill 1994). Given that according to the evolutionary explanation, human perceptions of beauty have evolved as indicators of health and quality, the standards of beauty should be universal and independent of the eye of the beholder. Indeed, numerous studies

demonstrated that people agree about who is and is not attractive, both within and across cultures (Langlois et al. 2000).

The second explanation for the attractiveness effect argues that it stems from social and cultural reasons (Wolf 2004). According to socialization theory, people are socialized to prefer beauty and to judge others according to their physical appearance. Western cultures associate beauty with good things and ugliness with bad things. In children's television and literature the wicked witch is ugly and the virtuous princess is physically attractive (Eagly et al. 1991). According to social expectancy theory, this socialization process results in self-fulfilling prophecies, caused by the differential expectations from attractive and unattractive targets (Langlois et al. 2000: 392). That is, we learn that beauty is good, and thus expect more of attractive people. These expectations lead us to judge and treat attractive and unattractive people differently. As Langlois et al. (2000) explain, the cultural and biological theories are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and may be operating simultaneously. The source of the attractiveness effect may be in human evolution, but it is amplified and reinforced by culture and socialization, which create differing expectations.

## Physical Attractiveness as a News Criterion

In this paper, we test the hypothesis that better-looking legislators receive more televised news coverage because physical attractiveness affects the news selection decisions made by journalists and editors. Of course, as documented by decades of communication research, this criterion does not supplant, but rather supplements, existing news selection criteria. In a seminal study, Galtung and Ruge (1965) noted that journalists and editors are faced every day with a stream of messages and events that compete for the limited time and space news outlets have to offer. Information is provided to journalists by a variety of sources, including government officials, leaders of interest groups, spokespeople representing various parties, and celebrities (Limor and Man 1997), who are often eager to appear in the news media to disseminate messages that promote their interests (Gans 1980). Journalists and editors employ a process of selection, based primarily on professional considerations, when deciding what sources and which stories will be covered (Berkowitz 1997; Harcup and O'Neill 2001).

While Galtung and Ruge's (1965) seminal study offered a set of news criteria that journalists use when deciding which *events* should be covered, later research has focused on the question of which *newsmakers* are more newsworthy. Such criteria include relevance (the more a person is directly related to the issue at hand, the more coverage he or she receives; Schoenbach et al. 2001), past suitability (the probability of using a source increases if that source has provided useful information in the past; Gans 1980), credibility, seniority (journalists prefer sources who hold high-ranking official positions; Cook 1986), cultural proximity, and productivity (given limited resources, journalists prefer sources that provide ample information easily, without the expenditure of time and effort on the part of the journalists; Gans 1980).

Research focusing on variation in coverage of legislators has documented that legislators' place in their legislative institution's hierarchy (as indicated by chairing a

committee or a subcommittee or serving as a party leader; Arnold 2004; Hess 1986), their activity in parliament or in politics (e.g., initiating bills, running for higher office, or being investigated by the ethics committee; Arnold 2004; Hess 1986; Squire 1988), and, to a lesser extent, their motivation to be covered by media (Vinson 2003) and cooperation with journalists (Hess 1986) predict their coverage in the news media, in addition to their leadership position in parliament. Sheafer (2001, 2007) also pointed out that legislators' charisma—their verbal and communicative talents— increase their value as media sources. For example, the more a politician knows how to work with journalists, and how to conform to the demands of news routines, the more likely he or she is to receive news media coverage. As Sheafer (2001) points out, these charismatic skills and resources do not encompass the entire scope of charisma, which may include physical appearance as well.

Given research on the attractiveness effect, there are many reasons why physical appearance should influence the selection of news sources, especially on television news. Journalists may prefer physically attractive interviewees because, as documented previously, they are perceived as more trustworthy (Horai et al. 1974), and journalists tend to prefer trustworthy sources (Gans 1980). In addition, given journalists' preference for articulateness and charisma (Sheafer 2001), attractive people may be preferred as interviewees, because they may be viewed as possessing better communicative skills (Chaiken 1979). The tendency of television to prefer physically attractive characters was noted by psychologists and media scholars (Signorielli 1993), and it seems only logical that a similar process would take place when it comes to gatekeeping processes in television news. This is true in particular in the era of commercial television, in which public affairs issues are essentially treated as entertainment (Meyer 2002; Postman 1986). Considerations relating to achieving "a good audience draw" (Berkowitz 1997) preoccupy the minds of editors and journalists, especially in the televised medium. The desire to satisfy as many audience members as possible may lead journalists to prefer physically attractive interviewees, because they may perceive that this is what their audience would be interested in watching, given the human preference for beauty. Hence, it is possible to hypothesize that legislators' physical attractiveness will be correlated with the extent of their media coverage, such that more attractive legislators will receive more coverage (Hypothesis 1).

As this is the first exploration of the effect of legislators' physical attractiveness on their coverage in television news, it makes sense to inquire about possible interactions of this factor with other predictors of coverage. The literature on the attractiveness effect finds evidence for an interaction between physical attractiveness and sex in some contexts (e.g., beauty plays a stronger role in the electoral success of women compared to men; Berggren et al. 2007) but not in others (the magnitude of the effect of attractiveness on earnings is similar for men and women; Hamermesh and Biddle 1994, and see Hosoda et al. 2003 for a meta-analysis revealing similar patterns in additional job-related and labor market studies). Likewise, given that research on the attractiveness effect demonstrates that physical attractiveness is more important in shaping first impressions (Dion and Berscheid 1974; Sorell and Nowek 1981) and less important in later stages in interpersonal interactions and long-term relationships (Etcoff 1999), it

makes sense that physical attractiveness will play a stronger role in shaping the coverage of novice legislators and that the effect of attractiveness on coverage would decrease as representatives' tenure in the parliament increases. Similar arguments can be made regarding additional predictors of news coverage such as political status and political extremity. In general, the literature about news criteria expects that each news predictor would interact with other news criteria in shaping coverage (Galtung and Ruge 1965). Thus, our research question (Research Question 1) asks: Will physical attractiveness interact with other demographic and political predictors in shaping news coverage?

## Method

The Israeli electoral system is national and proportional with the entire country serving as a single voting district. The Israeli television market operates predominantly at the national level, with virtually no news broadcast at the local level. The media market has grown competitive in recent years with the opening of a commercial channel (Channel 2) in 1993 (in addition to the state run public broadcast Channel 1 running from the late 1960s). These two channels were joined by another commercial channel in 2002—Channel 10. Israeli media institutions have become similar in many other respects to their European and North American counterparts (Peri 2004), and research about the interaction between politicians and the news media in Israel has thus far reached very similar conclusions to those obtained by research in the United States or in Britain (Sheafer and Wolfsfeld 2004: 626).

The main advantage of the Israeli context for the current exploration is simplicity, as no complex controls for the congruence between the media market and electoral district are necessary. To examine the aforementioned hypothesis, the physical attractiveness and the amount of news coverage of members of the 16th Israeli Knesset (2003-2006) were measured. While the Knesset is comprised of 120 members, we used data only on the 115 members who served in the Knesset for the entire term.<sup>1</sup>

## Measures

*Independent variable: Physical attractiveness.* Physical attractiveness is typically measured when study participants are instructed to evaluate the attractiveness of faces of people presented to them in still photographs (Eagly et al. 1991: 117; see also Berggren et al. 2007). The MKs' physical attractiveness was evaluated by 36 undergraduate and graduate communication students from the Netherlands.<sup>2</sup> Non-Israeli evaluators were used to rule out political biases in the evaluations of physical attractiveness (a left-wing evaluator may perceive right-wing politicians as relatively unattractive, because of their political dissimilarity; e.g., Shamir 1994) and given that research shows that prior information on the target affects attractiveness judgments (Gross and Crofton 1977). To provide a standard presentation of the MKs to participants (in terms of the level of cosmetic enhancement and the quality of the pictures), official photographs downloaded from the Knesset Web site were used. These pictures were similar in terms of the

photograph angle and the distance of the MK from the camera. In most cases, the background was common as well. The pictures show the MKs from the shoulders and above. Men were typically photographed wearing a dark suit. Females MKs' clothing varied. The questionnaires were printed using a high-quality color printer. Each student ranked the attractiveness of a random half of the MKs, whose pictures were randomly ordered. The questionnaires were completed in the classroom. Completing them took approximately ten minutes.

Pretests of different question wordings demonstrated that Likert-type scales labeled *very unattractive* to *very attractive* in response to the question "Please rate the physical attractiveness of the people in the pictures" resulted in very poor variance given that the attractiveness scores were, by and large, lower than the scale's midpoint. Therefore, we eventually used the following wording: "Look at all the following photos and rate the attractiveness of the persons in the photos, comparing each to the others. Relatively speaking, on a scale of 0 [ugly] to 10 [presentable], how would you rate these persons' physical appearance?" This question produced variance in the evaluations, and hence, was utilized. The internal consistency of the responses was Cronbach's  $\alpha = .90$ , indicating that the evaluators tended to agree regarding who is more and who is less physically attractive. Such agreement is consistent with ample research literature documenting that in contrast to the "beauty-is-in-the-eye-of-the-beholder" aphorism, "raters tend to agree about who is and is not attractive, both within and across cultures" (Langlois et al. 2000: 390). Each MK received an attractiveness score that was simply the average evaluation he or she received from the Dutch students ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ).

To rule out the possibility that cultural differences between the Netherlands and Israel may account for the findings, the attractiveness scores of politicians with low public recognition (as determined by a pretest) were correlated with the attractiveness evaluations of Israeli communication students. The correlation was very high and statistically significant ( $r = .81$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $n = 23$ ), indicating high rates of agreement between Israeli and Dutch students regarding who is and who is not attractive (again, this is consistent with the predictions of the evolutionary perspective on physical attractiveness and with the meta-analytic findings by Langlois et al. 2000).

**Dependent variable: Televised news coverage.** The Ifat Media Information Center maintains an ongoing tally of each time a legislator is interviewed in national television news (Channels 1, 2, and 10). Measures constructed from these indicators were successfully used in previous research (e.g., Sheaffer 2007). If portions of an interview are rebroadcast, then the rebroadcast is considered a second interview. The news coverage construct is simply the summations of MKs' appearances on TV during the 16th Knesset's term (February 17, 2003 through December 21, 2005). This variable ranged from 0 to 1,338 appearances ( $M = 157.27$ ;  $SD = 199.24$ ).

**Control variables.** Several variables known in the literature to impact politicians' news coverage were used as covariates in the analysis reported in the following pages. These particular control variables were selected given previous research on news appearances of Israeli politicians (Sheaffer 2007) and given research on coverage of legislatures elsewhere (e.g., Arnold 2004; Hess 1986; Squire 1988; Vinson 2003).

**Political standing.** This variable represented MKs' hierarchic position in the system (*senior cabinet ministers* [prime minister, foreign, defense and treasury ministers] = 5, *regular cabinet ministers and Knesset speaker* = 4, *committee chairs* = 3, *chairs of subcommittees or temporary committees* = 2, and *other; regular MKs* = 1). When a change in post occurred in the middle of the term the more senior post was coded. The variable had a mean of 2.69, with a standard deviation of 1.21.

**Political centrality and party affiliation.** This variable was defined as the MKs' party's distance from the nation's symbolic center, as defined by Neuberger (1997: 219). Following this definition, high centrality parties (Labor, Likud, and Shinuy) were coded 3, medium centrality parties (The National Religious Party and Meretz) were coded 2, and low centrality parties (the rest of the parties) were coded 1. The variable had a mean of 2.35, with a standard deviation of .87. To further control for party affiliation, we added a set of twelve dummy variables representing the thirteen different parties represented in the 16th Knesset. The omitted category was the largest party at the time—Likud.

**Military rank.** Given the political significance of military background in Israeli politics (Peri 1983, 2006), and given the dominance of security-related issues on the media agenda in Israel (Sheafer and Weimann 2005; Weimann and Goren 2001), MKs with a former career as high-ranking army officers are expected to be more frequently interviewed on Israeli media. Thus, a military rank variable was created, which was coded 0 for MKs who did not serve in the army (22.6 percent), 1 for regular duty ranks (private through staff sergeant), 2 for noncommissioned officer ranks (sergeant first class through chief warrant officer), 3 for junior officer ranks (second lieutenant through captain), 4 for senior officer ranks (major through lieutenant colonel), and 5 for very senior officers ranks (colonel through lieutenant general). The information about the MKs' military ranks was obtained from the Knesset's Web site. The variable had a mean of 1.79, with a standard deviation of 1.60.

Parliamentary activity was used as a predictor of news coverage following the work of Sheafer (2001, 2007; Sheafer and Wolfsfeld 2004) and given that studies abroad demonstrate that legislators' activity in parliament predicts that volume of coverage they receive (e.g., Arnold 2004 but not Squire 1988). This variable was measured using data from the Knesset Information Center.<sup>3</sup> The numbers of motions for the agenda and bill proposals, submitted by each MK in our sample, the numbers of bills submitted by each MK that passed at least first reading, and the number of plenum speeches they gave were recorded. Finally, we recorded the percentage of participation in plenum votes, and the percentage of days in which the MK was present in the Knesset on days it was in session.<sup>4</sup> Because the various indicators of activity were measured on different scales, they were standardized, and an activity score was calculated as the average of the seven indicators (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .71$ ;  $M = -.09$ ;  $SD = .83$ ).

Additional controls included the tenure of each MK in the Knesset (in years  $M = 7.59$ ,  $SD = 7.33$ ) and his or her demographics: gender (*female* = 1, 13.90 percent), age ( $M = 51.95$ ,  $SD = 9.10$ ), being an Arab MK (= 1, 8.70 percent), being an ultra-orthodox MK (= 1, 14.8 percent), and country of birth (*Israel* = 1, 73.90 percent);

**Table 1.** Poisson Regression Predicting Knesset Members' (MKs') Television News Coverage

	B	SE	E <sup>b</sup>
Political seniority	0.55 ***	0.10	1.73
Political centrality	1.04	1.01	2.82
Tenure in the Knesset	0.03 ***	0.01	1.03
Age	0.01	0.01	1.01
Sex (female = 1)	-0.08	0.28	0.92
Ultra-orthodox MKs (= 1)	-0.31	1.33	0.73
Arab MKs (= 1)	-3.38	2.76	0.03
Israeli born (= 1)	-0.02	0.18	0.98
Army rank	0.11 <sup>#</sup>	0.06	1.11
Parliamentary activity	-0.19*	0.09	0.82
Physical attractiveness	0.24**	0.09	1.27
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.54		
N	116		

Note: Table entries are Poisson regression coefficients. The model included twelve dummy variables for political parties (with the largest Likud party as the omitted category) that are not reported for the sake of parsimony.

\* $p < .10$ . \*\* $p \leq .05$ . \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ .

abroad = 0, 26.10 percent). All demographic information was collected from the Knesset's Web site.

## Results

Our investigation focused on the influence of MKs' physical attractiveness on their appearances on television news. Unfortunately, the use of an ordinary least squares regression is problematic in this case, due to the violation of the assumption of a normal distribution of the dependent variable (20 percent of the MKs appeared on TV news only 20 times or less during the entire three years of study, 40 percent appeared 51 times or less, 60 percent appeared 136 times or less, and the remaining MKs appeared between 137 and 1,338 times). This problem was solved using Poisson regression, which is the recommended technique for modeling discrete, extremely skewed and hence non-normal dependent variables (Allison 1999). Poisson regression is especially recommended when modeling variables that have non-negative integer values (Allison 1999: 217) like our dependent variable, which is essentially a count of the number of times each of the MKs appeared on television news. The problem of overdispersion, a frequent problem for Poisson models, was corrected using a deviance chi-square, following the recommendations of Agresti (see Allison 1999: 223).

Results are presented in Table 1. As Allison (1999: 221) explains, the interpretation of the coefficients in a Poisson model is similar to that in a logistic regression: That is, in Table 1, if we calculate  $100 \times (e^b - 1)$ , we get the percentage change in the expected number of television appearances with each one-unit increase in the independent

variable. To facilitate this interpretation, the coefficient's exponents are also reported in the table.

As the table demonstrates, and as suggested by the research literature on politicians' news coverage, MKs' news coverage was shaped by a variety of factors, which together account for 54 percent in the variance in television news coverage (the explained variance was comparable to that obtained in previous Israeli and U.S. studies: Arnold 2004; Sheafer 2001, 2007; Sheafer and Wolfsfeld 2004). The higher the seniority of MKs ( $B = .55, p \leq .001$ ) and the longer they served in the Knesset ( $B = .03, p \leq .001$ ), the more frequently they were covered by Israeli television, after controlling for all other factors. These findings are consistent with those obtained by Sheafer (2001, 2007). *Ceteris paribus*, the higher the MK's military rank, the more coverage he or she received in television news ( $B = .03, p \leq .10$ ). The coefficient for this variable failed to reach statistical significance, but the  $p$ -value was borderline significant ( $p = .06$ ). Parliamentary activity had a significant negative effect on coverage: More active members received less coverage ( $B = -.19, p \leq .05$ ). All else being equal, gender, being an Arab MK, being an ultra orthodox MK, and age did not have a significant effect on coverage. Of the twelve dummy variables for political parties (unreported in Table 1 for the sake of parsimony), only the dummy for the labor party has a significant effect on coverage ( $b = -.56, p < .01$ , suggesting that all else being equal, MKs from the labor party received on average less coverage compared to MKs from the Likud party), though the effects of several other dummies approached statistical significance (e.g., Shinuy members tended to receive on average more coverage compared to Likud members,  $p = .11$ ).

After controlling for all these factors, and as expected by Hypothesis 1, physical attractiveness had a positive and significant impact on televised news coverage, such that the higher the MKs' physical attractiveness scores, the higher the expected number of their television news appearances ( $B = .24, SE = .09, p \leq .01$ ). The interpretation of the coefficient is that each one-unit increase in the physical attractiveness scale was associated with an increase of 27.12 percent ( $100 \times (\exp(0.24) - 1)$ ) in the expected count of television appearances.

Interestingly, the bivariate association between physical attractiveness and news coverage was not significant ( $r = .15, p = .11$ ). The variables suppressing it were sex and age (controlling for either of them makes the association between physical attractiveness and news coverage borderline significant; controlling for both of them makes the association significant): Younger MKs were by and large better looking, but in general less frequently covered, and these facts suppress the genuine effect of attractiveness on coverage. Females were ranked as more physically attractive but in general received much less coverage, and these facts also worked to cancel out the effect of attractiveness on coverage.

Our Research Question 1 asked about possible interactions between physical attractiveness and other predictors of news coverage. To test for these possible interactions, we calculated the product terms for all the ten possible interactions and entered them separately into the regression model (the ten resulting models are unreported). In nine

out of ten models, the coefficient for the interaction term was not statistically significant. In other words, the effect of physical attractiveness on coverage did not depend on tenure in parliament, political centrality, parliamentary activity, and demographics (sex, age, being an Arab or an Ultra Orthodox MK, or being born in Israel or abroad). The only interaction that approached statistical significance was between physical attractiveness and military rank ( $B_{\text{physical attractiveness}} = .43, p < .01$ ;  $B_{\text{army rank}} = .51, p < .05$ ;  $B_{\text{Physical Attractiveness} \times \text{Military Rank}} = -.08, p = .063$ ). The interpretation of this interaction was that the effect of physical attractiveness was strongest for MKs with no army service ( $B = .43$ ) and grew weaker as the MKs' military rank got higher (e.g., the effect of physical attractiveness on coverage for a junior officer  $B = .19$ ). The effect of physical attractiveness became almost null ( $B = .03$ ), according to our model, for top-ranking officers.

*Further analysis.* As this is an exploratory study, we tested for a possible nonlinear effect of physical attractiveness on coverage by adding a quadratic term to the model (unreported model). The quadratic term was insignificant, and thus, we concluded that there was no evidence supporting such a quadratic effect.

## Discussion

The aforementioned analysis reveals that more physically attractive Knesset members received more coverage on TV news. This finding remained significant even when controlling for other predictors of news coverage, such as political seniority and tenure in parliament. This finding is intriguing in particular because news coverage of acting politicians is very different than some of the other contexts in which an attractiveness effect was documented—for example, job interviews or persuasive appeals. In the case of TV coverage of members of parliament, journalists have ample substantive information to rely on regarding the politicians—they know their positions and platforms, their success or failure as interviewees in the past, and so on. The normative principles of democracy imply that the quality of a politician's ideas, or his or her actual performance in parliament, rather than his or her physical appearance, should be the central considerations in the decision regarding whether or not these ideas should be disseminated in the public sphere. But the effect of physical attractiveness on coverage was stronger and significant, compared to some of the other predictors, and the effect of parliamentary activity on coverage was surprisingly *negative*, not positive. It is worthwhile to note that physical attractiveness was one of the strongest predictors of television news coverage (second only to political standing and tenure in the Knesset, stronger than military rank, parliamentary activity, and the other predictors in the model), and thus its role in shaping coverage should not be taken lightly.

To illustrate the role played by physical attractiveness, we calculated the predicted number of television appearances for a Jewish, male, Israeli-born, secular MK, with average parliamentary activity, tenure, and age, with no special cabinet or Knesset roles, from a "high centrality" party, and with a regular duty military rank. For such an MK with the lowest attractiveness score (attractiveness = 2), the expected number of

television appearances was 19.89. For an MK with an average attractiveness score (attractiveness = 4), the expected number of television appearances was 32.16. For an MK with the highest score on the attractiveness scale (attractiveness = 7.39), the expected number of television appearances was 72.55.<sup>5</sup> These figures, and the fact that there was no evidence supporting a quadratic effect of attractiveness on coverage, points out that appearance provides a bonus for the relatively good looking, and at the same time, a penalty for the relatively unattractive.

While the discourse of public relations specialists and media consultants highlights the importance of looks in creating political images (e.g., Brown 1994; Reid 2004), the actual importance of physical attractiveness in obtaining news coverage has never been empirically tested. Thus, the current findings have obvious practical implications for PR experts, media consultants, as well as politicians. They highlight yet another mechanism that explains politicians' media coverage, a variable that relates to their electoral success (Sheafer 2007), and to their success as legislators. The findings should also be of interest to reporters, who may want to consider whether they are serving the public interest when they assign more coverage to attractive politicians.

Theoretically, the findings add physical attractiveness to contemporary knowledge about factors influencing legislators' news selection and presentation. As Harcup and O'Neill (2001) maintain, given cultural and technological changes, it is essential to revisit and reexamine theory and research in this domain frequently. Interestingly, while most news selection criteria that have been examined in the research literature (e.g., elite status or cultural resonance) are explicitly acknowledged by journalists and accord well with their professional discourse, the criterion of physical attractiveness works unconsciously and in many ways may contradict journalistic discourse.

Our results join recent political science findings that demonstrate that physical appearance plays a role in voters' decisions (Berggren et al. 2007; Surawski and Ossoff 2006). One can suggest that the current findings offer part of the mechanism explaining these previous political science findings: Perhaps physical attractiveness promotes news coverage and news coverage promotes electoral success (and there is evidence supporting the latter association in the Israeli context—Sheafer 2007—and elsewhere—e.g., Prior 2006). The fact that the association between vote and appearance is stronger among low information voters who watch ample television (Lenz and Lawson 2009) is also possibly consistent with this explanation as physically attractive candidates will be in particular accessible for these audiences, according to our findings. However, one should note that some of the evidence tying physical attractiveness with electoral success comes from experimental or correlational studies in which respondents do not know how much coverage is received by the candidates in reality. Thus, while our findings may provide some explanation as to why physically attractive candidates are more electable, heightened news coverage is clearly not the only mechanism underlying this phenomenon.

Interestingly, we found little evidence supporting an interaction between physical attractiveness and the other predictors of news coverage. This means that the effect of physical attractiveness was roughly the same for females and males, young and old,

seculars and orthodox, Arabs and Jews, novices and veterans, and senior and junior MKs. The only interaction that approached statistical significance ( $p = .06$ ) was between physical attractiveness and military rank, such that the effect of attractiveness decreases for former senior army officers. Most likely, the interpretation of this finding is related to the high news value enjoyed by former generals in Israeli media (Peri 1983). Their news value is probably so high that their physical attractiveness matters little, or does not matter at all, for their TV news coverage.

This study is not free of limitations. The first obvious limitation is that it is based in the Israeli context, which raises the issue of generalizability from this to other contexts. The Israeli context was selected for convenience reasons: As Israeli scholars we naturally have access to Israeli data. As explained previously, given the simplicity of the electoral system and the media market in the Israeli context, it is also much simpler to model for news coverage as it not necessary to take into account the congruence between electoral districts and media markets in the country. However, we see no reason that our present findings would *not* generalize to other Western contexts. This is because Israeli media institutions have become similar in many respects to their European and North American counterparts (Peri 2004), and given that other research about the interaction between politicians and the news media in Israel has thus far reached very similar conclusions to those obtained by research in the United States or in Britain (Sheafer and Wolfsfeld 2004: 626). Finally, we believe that our findings are generalizable to other contexts given that research on the attractiveness effect found that, in general, beauty affects life across cultures (Etcoff 1999).

Another main limitation of the current exploration is that we did not identify the exact mechanism through which physical attractiveness affects news coverage. Previous findings on the attractiveness effect suggest three such possible mechanisms. The first mechanism may relate to the fact that attractive people are perceived as more eloquent (Chaiken 1979) and trustworthy (Horai et al. 1974). Such perceptions by journalists may account for the increased coverage of better-looking representatives. The second mechanism may be related to journalists' knowledge regarding the importance of physical attractiveness in life and their projection of this knowledge on their audience (i.e., knowing that people are attracted to beauty makes journalists inclined to offer more coverage to better-looking legislators because they expect that coverage of better-looking newsmakers would attract the attention of the audience). The third mechanism, competition for coverage, is not related at all to the perceptions of journalists, but rather to the qualities of the newsmakers. Given that it is well known that attractive people have greater self-esteem (Eagly et al. 1991), perhaps their more confident personalities make them more proactive in seeking news coverage, which consequently explains their more frequent coverage.

Despite this ambiguity, one thing is almost clear. The possibility of reverse causation, a major caveat of most correlational studies in our field, is not a serious threat to the validity of the findings in our case. It is very unlikely that the evaluations of physical attractiveness, measured overseas by students who did not know they were evaluating the attractiveness of Israeli politicians, were affected by the politicians'

coverage on television in Israel. While the possibility exists that politicians with better access to image makers have better photographs, and independently, given these better image makers, receive more television coverage, it also seems somewhat unlikely. While the effect of physical attractiveness is likely mediated by some of the factors discussed previously, the more probable time sequence (physical attractiveness typically comes before news coverage) points out that the causal mechanism operates from physical attractiveness to coverage, and not the other way around. The bias documented by our results is still a bias (in the sense that one would expect to see more good-looking politicians on the television screen), even if it is explained by the fact that journalists are influenced by more confident and highly motivated, better-looking politicians, or by some other unspecified mechanism.

An additional limitation had to do with the use of still photographs, downloaded from the Knesset Web site, for the attractiveness evaluations. Admittedly, there are people who look better in pictures than in real life, while other people may look better in real life than in pictures. In real life, however, reporters know the legislators not only from pictures. While ideally, using a sample of short video clips for the attractiveness evaluations may have resulted with more valid assessments, it was almost impossible to locate standard videos for the MKs. Thus, we preferred using the more conventional paper-and-pencil evaluation of still photographs that has been widely and successfully used in past research.

Our understanding of the exact mechanism underlying the association between physical attractiveness and news coverage has immense theoretical, if not normative, implications. Thus, future research should pursue this topic, in additional contexts, and try to determine how this process works. More than a decade and a half has passed since Hamermesh and Biddle (1994) established that workers of above-average beauty earn about 10 to 15 percent more than workers of below-average beauty. While we know much more today about why better-looking people receive higher salaries (Mobius and Rosenblat 2006), the effect of physical attractiveness on pay has still not been totally explained (Judge et al. 2009). Empirically testing the aforementioned explanations would pose a challenge for media scholars, as none of the indicators of the potential mediators (e.g., legislators' self-esteem) would be easy to obtain. Some progress could be made if we had at hand data about the politicians' coverage in other media (e.g., in the nonvisual radio), but unfortunately such data are not readily available in the Israeli context. If an association between media coverage and attractiveness exists in such nonvisual media, then the explanations relating to journalists' perceptions of audience expectations could probably be negated. Thus, the efforts to continue our understanding of the association between physical attractiveness and news coverage are likely to be worthwhile. The answer to the current puzzle may be important for our understanding of the journalistic selection process in the political domain.

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## Notes

1. This includes nine Members of the Knesset (MKs) who resigned several days before the 16th Knesset was dissolved. The patterns of results reported in the following were not affected by their exclusion.
2. As Todorov et al. (2005) explain, increasing the number of participants from 30 to 40 increased the accuracy of predicting election outcomes, but further increasing the number of participants to 50 did not increase the accuracy of predictions.
3. See <http://www.knesset.gov.il/stats/heb/16/template.asp>
4. All these measures related to the third and fourth sessions of the 16th Knesset, between October 2004 and December 2005.
5. In comparison, the change in coverage from the minimal to the maximal military rank (for someone with an average attractiveness score) was from 28.80 to 49.93 appearances. The change in coverage from the minimal to the maximal political standing scores (a much stronger predictor of coverage, again for someone with an average attractiveness score) was from 32.16 to 290.23 appearances.

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