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

Holley E. Hansen, Department of Political Science

Undergraduate Co-authors: Garrett Dugan, Breanna Jacobitz, & Chase LaSpisa

Research Question

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

Abstract

Some research suggests that candidates with a "pretty face" may have an electoral advantage, but it is less clear whether this advantage is due to the information shortcut taken by low-information voters, or whether it is due to deeper cognitive preferences that apply equally in low- and high-information voters. Mexico's Chamber of Deputies, which elects 300 members from single-member plurality districts and 200 members from political parties (based on the results of a closed-list proportional representation votes), offers a natural experiment to test this effect. We analyze photographs of the members of the 2015-2018 Mexican Chamber of Deputies to calculate facial symmetry, and while we fail to find a significant difference for male candidates, female candidates are judged based on their appearance, as SMD females have more symmetric features and PR females less symmetric ones than their male colleagues.

Background Literature

Appearance & vote choice

- Heuristic for candidate policy position
  - (Sigelman et al.1987; McDermont 1998; Koch 2000; Herrick et al. 2015)
- Influences perceptions of candidate competence / qualities
  - (Sapiro 1981-1982; Sigelman et al. 1987; Alexander and Anderson 1993)

The attractiveness advantage

- Easier for attractive people to win elections
  - (Sigelman et al. 1987; Rosar et al. 2008; Milazzo and Mattes 2016)
- Viewed as more interesting, successful, socially competent, & memorable

Theory

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

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

The gender double-standard:
- Attractive women viewed as less competent in "masculine sex-typed jobs" (Johnson et al. 2010) ; Judged more harshly by high-information voters (Hart et al. 2011)

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

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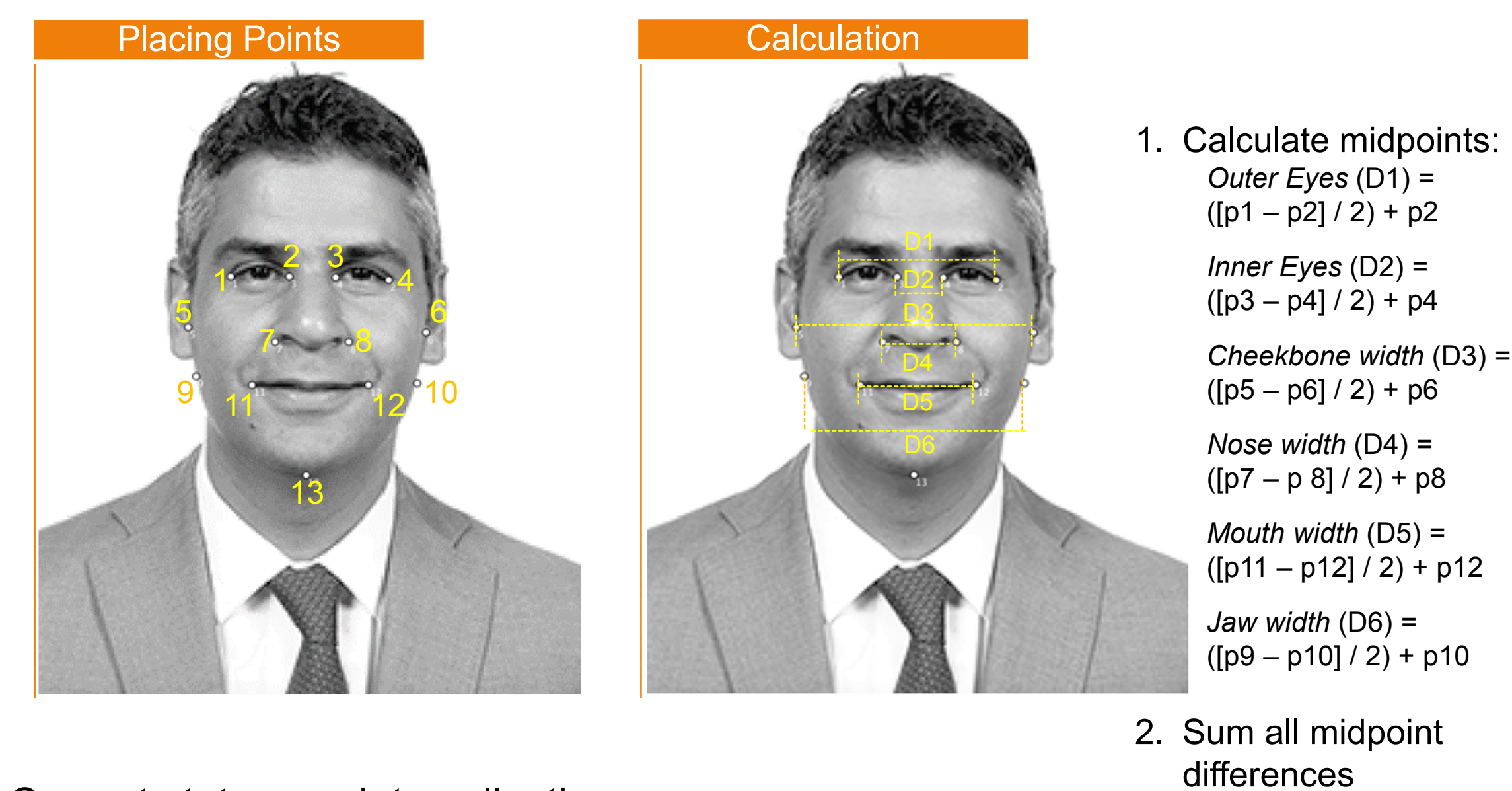
Research Design

Sample: Mexican Chamber of Deputies (2015-2018)

Info on members of parliament (MPs) from Chamber of Deputies & *Sistema de Información Legislativa* websites

Dependent variable

MP horizontal facial symmetry score

Figure 2: Facial Symmetry Analysis using ImageJ Software (Available from https://imagej.nih.gov/ij/)

Placing Points | Calculation

1. Calculate midpoints:
   Outer Eyes (D1) = ([p1 – p2] / 2) + p2
   Inner Eyes (D2) = ([p3 – p4] / 2) + p4
   Cheekbone width (D3) = ([p5 – p6] / 2) + p6
   Nose width (D4) = ([p7 – p 8] / 2) + p8
   Mouth width (D5) = ([p11 – p12] / 2) + p12
   Jaw width (D6) = ([p9 – p10] / 2) + p10
2. Sum all midpoint differences

Current status on data collection:
- Initial results completed from the original research team
- Reliability testing by having a team of undergraduate researchers complete the same coding

Independent variables

Election rule used to elect MP:
- 1 = party list (200 MPs)
- 0 = SMD list (300 MPs)

MP Gender

Control variables

From MP website bios:
- Age
- Education level
- Prior political experience
- Photo "mugshot"

Results

Table 2: Facial Symmetry of Members of the Mexican Chamber of Deputies
(Linear Regression)

	Model 1	Model 2
PR list	-.115 (.081)	.030 (.085)
Female	**.219* (.100)**	**.537** (.121)**
Female * PR list		**-.880** (.198)**
Age	**-.020** (.004)**	**-.020** (.004)**
Education	.025 (.039)	.023 (.038)
Previous deputy	.106 (.088)	.079 (.086)
Previous mayor	-.080 (.081)	-.062 (.078)
Previous senator	.198 (.187)	.213 (.180)
"Mugshot" picture	.279 (.249)	.278 (.240)
Constant	8.050** (.317)	7.989** (.307)
N	277	277
R^2	0.122	.182
Adjusted R^2	.095	.155

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Facial Symmetry by Gender & Electoral System

Mean symmetry scores with standard error bars based on t tests
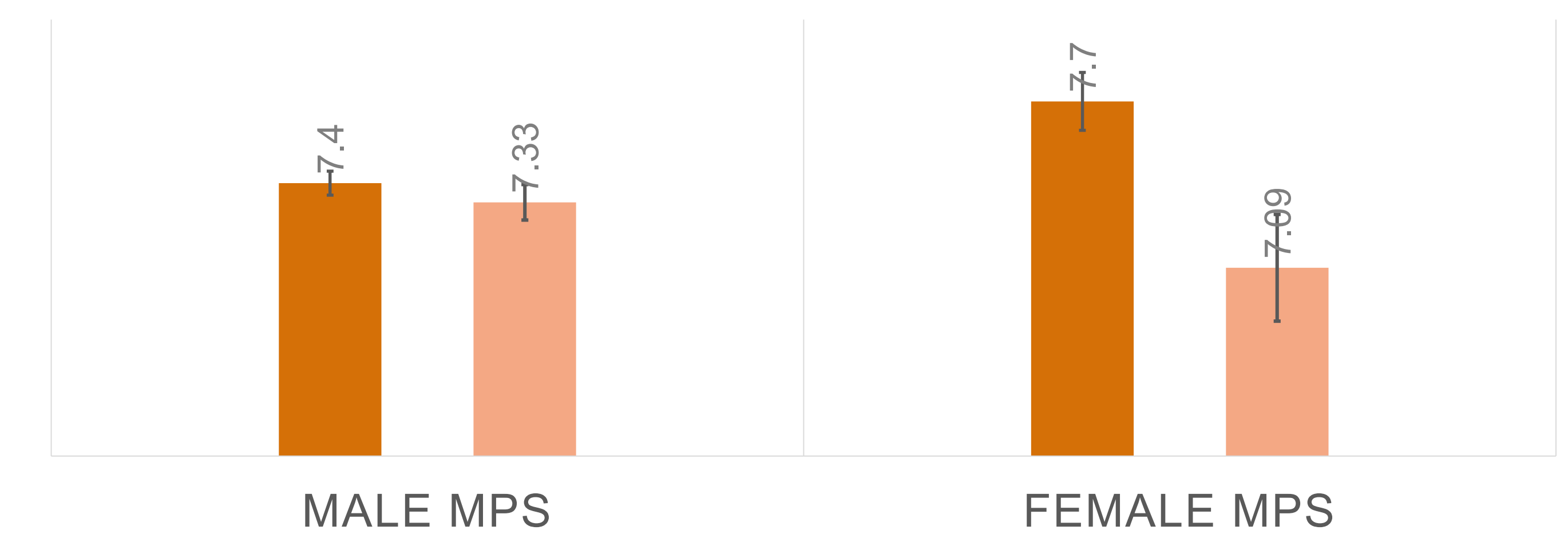
Main findings:

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

Conclusion

- Findings support previous literature suggesting that attractiveness can be a double-edged sword for women candidates
  - Voters are selecting "prettier" female candidates, but are parties discriminating against "pretty" candidates or saving them for the SMD lists?

- Next step for this project:
  - Quasi-experimental study in Mexico on symmetry & candidate electability
  - Tracing symmetry scores over time

Other Research

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

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