Campaign trail cliché: an analysis of U.S. politicians photo-taking behavior with children

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Abstract

During recent years, several researchers investigated politicians' public appearances to understand the impact of their actions on voters' intentions. Despite the large body of literature surrounding the politicians' families, especially in the U.S. context, little is known about the practice and general influence of politicians taking photographs with infants and children. In this study, politicians' behavior, and especially their public appearances next to infants and children during the presidential campaigns, is evaluated. Results across different presidential campaigns (from 1924 to 2020) confirms that politicians are more likely to take pictures with infants and children the closer it gets to the actual election date. Moreover, results reveal that the different parties—Democratic and Republican—engage in this practice at different stages of the campaign, which varies their likelihood of being elected.

Introduction

Media has been an integral part of our lives and it can be used to shape public opinion especially in a democratic society. With the ubiquitous influence of media, it is now impossible to separate political life from popular culture [1]. Media has placed politicians' lives in the spotlight, with politicians being increasingly likely to disclose information about their personal life [2, 3] and appear in detailed planned appearances in public events, pictures, and television talks [4]. This is especially prominent in the USA, where media publishers hunt for gossip about public political figures [5, 6].

Politicians are renowned for their practiced actions to capture the audience, with both verbal and non-verbal behaviors. It is commonplace to see images, video recordings, or written reports of crowds gathered to witness a public speech of a politician, such as in recent rallies [7] or in older documents depicting the public appearances of political leaders [8] and dictators [9]. However, the content of politicians' speeches play a less crucial role as compared to nonverbal behaviors, such as shaking hands, posing for pictures, or kissing babies [10–12]. Nonetheless, politicians face a communication dilemma whereby they generally have much more to gain and lose through interacting with members of the crowd, as opposed to an individual from the crowd. If the politician is able to effectively work the audience, it can directly increase

the amount and quality of personal testimonials shared about them [10]. On the contrary, if politicians are ineffective in working the audience, it can damage their relation with the public [10]. Despite the fact that nonverbal performances are harder to tailor, such behaviors are more effective at increasing the likelihood of self-presentational success [11]. As such, every move and action is painstakingly curated to increase the politician’s likeability, which in turn helps them secure votes.

Through an increasingly diverse selection of media, spin-doctors –public relations advisors, pollsters, and media consultants behind the development of deceptive or misleading messages— have consistently focused on the exploitation of the lives of politicians’ families, especially the wives and children [13]. In a study on the role of candidates’ wives in the 2000’s election, Winfield and Friedman [14] noted how their public appearances changed in the present times, from a supportive (“Escort”) role, to a co-candidate role where they are primary and essential element of the rallies [15, 16]. Similarly for candidates’ children, they moved from an almost invisible position at the beginning of the twentieth century to a central position by the beginning of the twenty-first century [13, 17, 18]. However, the children are still relegated to passive roles, while the politicians’ wives play a more active role by engaging in miscellaneous campaign activities. This change in the role of politicians’ children has been portrayed in popular culture as well. Although, this change is not exclusive to politicians’ children, other infants and young children that politicians encounter during their campaigns are also portrayed. While the situation is still unclear abroad, the practice of using children’s appearance for the political campaign has been widely verified in the USA [17–19], and has been represented in books, movies, sitcoms, stand-up comedies, and even musicals.

For example, in the 2014 remake of the 1982 movie *Annie*, which was inspired by the 1977 Broadway musical, it presents child exploitation for political reasons in popular culture. The movie’s plot focuses on a young orphan, Annie, who was run over while trying to defend a dog from a group of bullies. William, a mogul who was running for the position of the Mayor in New York City, came to Annie’s aid. Annie’s rescue went viral on the Internet, which raised the popularity of William. After the event, Williams’ campaign manager advised him to adopt the child, as her presence could boost his popularity as a candidate to an even higher level. But why does posing next to a young individual increase a candidate’s chance of winning an election? Works in the field of Politics widely investigated the factors that influence voters’ intentions, demonstrating that the perception of candidates’ personality and competence —intelligence, trustworthiness, and political capabilities— play a role in voters’ intention, especially for uncertain voters and for those who are less bound by affiliation to a political party [20–25]. The process that encompasses the projection of intended messages is referred to as Political Advertising, which can be achieved through mass channels such as posters, brochures, mail, newspaper, magazine advertising, television advertising, and the Internet [26]. Themes of economic insecurity, poverty, war, crime, and hope for the future are commonly associated with children in political advertising [27]. Most notably, the usage of the images of children shifts the public perception of the politician from a self-centered rhetoric to an altruistic rhetoric [27]. Through the association with children, the candidate is perceived to be making demands for the sake of children, to pave a better world for the future generations where a child’s innocence is protected and it appeals to parents who desires financial security for their children [27]. All of these gave rise to the American cliché of the “baby-kissing politician”.

Previous works demonstrated that human faces elicit emotional or affective responses in humans [28–30]. Children’s faces especially are perceived as more likeable and attractive [31, 32]. Defined as Baby Schema —an innate reflex as the caretaking and nurturing of babies is crucial for humans’ survival [28]—, it suggests that adult faces are

perceived less favourably as compared to children’s faces [31,32]. The stereotypical physical appearance of babies — a round face, small nose, high forehead, and large eyes— are key visual stimuli to kindle positive affect in humans [28]. This is further backed by the baby-face overgeneralization effect, whereby baby-faced individuals are ascribed more childlike traits, regardless of age or race [33–35]. Compared to individuals who are more mature-looking, baby-faced individuals are perceived to be more honest, naive, kind, and warm [36,37]. For these reasons, children are perceived by the public as a blank slate, which causes the public to disregard the prejudices associated with a politician when they are featured together with children during a campaign [38].

Another factor that contributes to the “baby-kissing politician” cliché is classical conditioning. Classical conditioning is where attitudes are formed through repeated and consistent pairings of conditioned stimulus (novel object) with unconditioned stimulus (negatively or positively evaluated object) [39]. Attitudes can be formed unconsciously through subliminal priming method of classical conditioning [39–41]. This implies that for attitudes to form, it does not require the individual to be consciously aware of the presence of the attitude object [39,42]. As a result, this potentially suggests that through the association with babies, politicians can cause the public to unconsciously associate positive attitudes with themselves. This Halo Effect—a widely reported effect for which an individual’s traits are estimated from the physical appearance [33,43, e.g. aesthetically looking strangers are perceived as trustworthy, but no information about the person’s trustworthiness are given]— may therefore induce viewers to associate traits typically associated with children faces (such as innocence or honesty) with the politicians depicted next to them.

Despite researchers’ effort within the field, little is known about the extent of truthfulness behind the act of politicians using infants and children in their campaign to increase their popularity and likelihood of being elected. The aim of this study is to verify the extent to which the presence of children is exploited by politicians for their political campaigns. If this is the case, politicians should take more pictures with children later in their campaign, as compared to the beginning of the campaign. Here we focus on U.S. presidential campaigns, as a majority of the literature published on politicians’ images is based on American politicians. Additionally, the decision to focus on American politician is based on (a) the possibility to investigate the effect across an extended period of time, and (b) the possibility to access pictures published on independent sources of information (e.g. newspapers not controlled by the governments or where censorship is absent or limited). Therefore, we hypothesize that U.S. politicians are more likely to appear next to infants and children the closer it gets to the election date, which is the first Tuesday after November 1st. Additionally, we aim to conduct a set of exploratory analysis, not based on any hypothesis, to investigate whether Democrats and Republicans have different behaviors with respect to how often they engage in taking pictures with children, or whether the practice predicts the outcome of the election.

Methods

To test our hypothesis, we inspected all the images portraying presidential candidates that have been published in The New York Times in the six months before each presidential election. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of the School of Social Sciences (Nanyang Technological University, IRB reference number: PSY-IRB-2019-008).

The study was preregistered on the Open Science Framework before the beginning of the data collection [44].

The digitalized copy of the newspapers published between September 1851 and

December 2002 has been browsed through "*TimesMachine*", the online archive of The New York Times. The New York Times was selected as it provides access to the digitalized version of the newspapers starting from 1851. Articles published between January 2003 and November 2020 have been accessed from the web interface of the newspaper. The data collection has been conducted between July 2019 and November 2020. For each election, the six ($N = 6$) months before each election date were investigated (from May to November). For each day under investigation, a search for articles naming involved politicians has been conducted using the internal meta tags search engine. The content of each picture has been manually encoded. More specifically, each picture has been coded for the presence of one or more infants or children within the picture.

Dataset

Articles published on The New York Times were manually inspected in their digital versions. No pictures were available in newspapers published before the 1908 election, and no pictures with infants and children have been published before 1924. Therefore, our dataset contains data of elections conducted between 1924 and 2020, and consists of the annotations of eight thousand and twenty-four pictures ($N = 8024$). Of this dataset, three hundred seventy-seven pictures ($N = 377$, 4.7%) depicts both (a) one or more politicians and (b) one or more or infant or child. The final dataset generated for this study and the scripts employed for the analysis are available on the Data Repository of the Nanyang Technological University [45].

Analytic Plan

Because of the smaller exposure of smaller parties, our analysis focused only on the images depicting presidential candidates of the Republican and Democratic parties. Moreover, since the number of pictures published in newspapers has increased over the years, we converted the absolute number of photos published to the percentage of pictures with infants and children on the total number of pictures of a specific candidate published within that month to compare pictures taken in different period of time.

Linear regression was employed to confirm whether politicians take more pictures with infants and children as the election day approaches. The existence of such a relations has been investigated both regardless of the party and by looking at the trend of a single party (e.g. exclusively on politicians of the Democratic party).

Results

Result of our analysis show the existence of a significant trend in the number of pictures U.S. politicians take with infants and children within their presidential campaigns. More specifically, our model shows that as the election date draws closer, politicians are more likely to appear in a photo next to one or more children (Figure ??, $R^2 = 0.87$, $p\text{-value} = 0.0258$).

When the two parties are analyzed independently, a different scenario is presented, as shown in Figure ?. While the relationship between closeness to the election date and number of pictures with infants and child is significantly present for what concerns politicians of the Republican party ($R^2 = 0.92$, $p\text{-value} = 0.00921$) but not for the politicians of the Democratic party ($R^2 = -0.72$, $p\text{-value} = 0.107$). Republicans have therefore a higher tendency to take photographs with infants or children when the election approaches, as compared to the Democratic party.

To investigate the possibility that higher order models better represent the set of collected data, a trend analysis was conducted using `pyEasyTrend` [46, version 0.0.0.7], a python package designed to conduct trend analysis. Results revealed that for what concerns the democratic party, higher order models are not performing significantly better than a reduced model based on the mean. On the other hand, while a linear model is performing significantly better than a reduced model based on the mean, higher order models, such as the quadratic and the cubic models, are not performing significantly better than the linear model. Results of the power analysis are reported in Table 1. These results suggest that politicians of the Democratic parties pose with infants and children with constant frequency during the campaigning, as compared to politicians of the Republican parties, who pose more often with infants and children toward the end of the electors season.

Table 1. Results of the Trend Analysis conducted using `pyEasyTrend`. For each pair of model and party, the coefficient of determination R^2 , F-value, p-value, Akaike information criterion (AIC), and the Bayesian information criterion (BIC).

Party	Model	R^2	F	p-value	AIC	BIC
Democratic	Linear	0.517	4.279	0.107	-31.29	-31.50
	Quadratic	0.674	1.444	0.316	-31.65	-32.07
	Cubic	0.688	0.094	0.788	-29.93	-30.55
Republican	Linear	0.847	22.223	0.009	-39.48	-39.69
	Quadratic	0.937	4.265	0.131	-41.79	-32.20
	Cubic	0.953	0.696	0.492	-42.58	-43.20

To investigate the effect of photo-taking behaviors on the share of popular votes obtained by a candidate, two linear models have been fitted on the percentage of pictures representing the candidate next to an infant or a child out of the total number of pictures published depicting a candidate within an election campaign. Results, visually represented in Figure ??, show that the correlation between the amount of pictures depicting politicians next to younger kids and share of popular vote is stronger for politicians of the Democratic party ($R^2 = 0.288$, p-value = 0.182), as compared to politicians affiliated to the Republican party ($R^2 = -0.163$, p-value = 0.457).

Discussion

In this work, we verified the extent to which U.S. politicians tend to engage in photo-taking behaviors with infants and children during the six months preceding a presidential election. The photo-taking behavior of U.S. presidential candidates across twenty-three ($N = 23$) presidential elections was assessed. Analysis of pictures published on The New York Times revealed a general tendency of American candidates to engage more in the practice the closer it gets to the election date. In an attempt to discern politicians behavior by party of affiliation —we decided to focus on the Democratic and Republican party exclusively—, a separate analysis on behavioral data of candidates of the two parties was conducted. Results revealed that while there is a strong tendency for candidates of the Republican party to increase the number of pictures taken with infants and babies the closer it gets to the elections date ($R^2 = 0.92$), the situation is quite the opposite for members of the Democratic part ($R^2 = -0.72$). A comparison between linear models and reduced models —based on the mean— further revealed that the tendency is significant for Republican candidates (p-value = 0.00921) but not for candidates of the Democratic Party (p-value = 0.107). To confirm that the trend is following a different trajectory (e.g. first descending, than increasing), a trend analysis

on higher order models (up to the Cubic model) was performed. Both the results based on the F-test between full and reduced models, as well the Akaike and Bayesian criterion suggest that the linear model is the most appropriate at representing the behavior of Republican candidates, while a reduced model based on the mean is the most representative of Democratic candidates (Table 1).

Taken together, these findings suggests Republican candidates tend to take more pictures the closer it gets to the actual election date, while Democratic candidates are more consistent in their behavior during the campaign. Finally, we investigated whether appearing in a higher number of pictures with infants and children brings benefits to the candidates in terms of share of popular vote during the election. While linear models fitted on the data of the parties yield no significantly better results than model based on the mean (p-value = 0.182 for the Democratic party, p-value = 0.457 for representative of the Republican party), the practice of posing with infants and children benefit candidates of the Democratic parties the most ($R^2 = 0.288$), as compared to candidates of the Republican party ($R^2 = -0.163$), that on the contrary seems slightly disadvantaged by the practice.

To provide a preliminary investigation of the influence of the practice of posing with infants and children an influence on the perceived trustworthiness of the politician, we compared our data with data about perceived trust toward politicians [47]. Amongst the available time-points (1958 - 2019), we considered only data collected within thirty-one ($N = 31$) days from an election, to assess the perceived trustworthiness toward the end of the campaign. The final sample consisted of the trustworthiness data at twelve ($N = 12$) different elections. While no significant correlation was found between the percentage of pictures depicting politicians with infants and children, and perceived trustworthiness ($R^2 = -0.047$, p-value = 0.883, Figure ??), results revealed that in nine ($N = 9$) out of the twelve elections (75%, Bernoulli Trial's p-value = 0.073), trust toward the government was higher amongst members of the party who took more pictures with infants and children. While additional in-depth studies are required to demonstrate a possible correlation between photo-taking behavior and perceived trustworthiness (e.g. by conducting a study where the behavior of possible candidates is manipulated), results here reported provide an interesting insight on the effectiveness of such behaviors on the perception of the candidates.

While this work investigates the consistency of a behavior across an extended period of time, it is worth highlighting some limitations of the dataset we employed. First, the images we inspected were published on a single source, which is The New York Times. Future works should focus on obtaining data from multiple sources, to take into account the possibility that a single media is depicting the candidates in different ways. Moreover, images were manually inspected, and therefore it's possible that some codings are not perfectly accurate, especially for older pictures, where the quality of the scan was not high, it is possible that one politician has not been recognized. An inter-coder reliability on the images published before 2002 revealed an average between coders agreement at the 83%. Moreover, some of the pictures may not have been correctly labelled, and this is especially difficult to exclude for low-quality digitalized versions of very old pictures. Therefore, while trusting the reliability of the captions of the images, it is possible that some candidate was mistaken for another. Finally, here we focused solely on American presidential elections. Future works should focus on both other type of elections (e.g. local candidates) and on the behavior of politicians from other countries.

In this work, we confirmed that American presidential candidates tend to take more pictures with infants and children the closer it gets to the election date. While politicians of different parties engage in the practice differently, there seems to be no significant impact on the share of popular votes obtained by Democratic or Republican

candidates caused by the amount of images they take with younger individuals. 255
 Future works should extend the analysis to images collected from different sources 256
 —both from newspapers and candidate’s own social media—, and by investigating the 257
 impact on possible voters in controlled experimental situations. Moreover, future 258
 studies could investigate the impact of the number of children posing within a single 259
 picture on the perception of a candidate. 260

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Figures captions

Fig. 1. Average number of pictures, corrected by number of pictures published by month, candidates take with infants, children, or teens during the six months preceding a presidential election.

Fig. 2. Average number of pictures, corrected by number of pictures published by month, candidates take with infants, children, or teens by month and affiliation party (Democratic or Republican).

Fig. 3. Share of popular vote by percentage of pictures candidates take with infants, children, or teens by affiliation party (Democratic or Republican).

Fig. 4. Voters' perceived trustworthiness of a candidate by percentage of pictures candidates take with infants or children by affiliation party (Democratic or Republican).