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Newscasters' Facial Expressions and Voting Behavior of Viewers: Can a Smile Elect a President?

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Two studies were conducted to examine the association between newscasters' facial expressions and the voting behavior of viewers. Study 1 examined the facial expressions exhibited by network newscasters while referring to the 1984 presidential candidates prior to the election. Results indicated that one of the three newscasters exhibited significantly more positive facial expressions when referring to Reagan than when referring to Mondale. Study 2 consisted of a telephone survey conducted to determine whether voting behavior was associated with the nightly news program watched. It was found that voters who regularly watched the newscaster who exhibited the biased facial expressions were significantly more likely to vote for the candidate that newscaster had smiled upon. Discussion considered possible explanations for, and implications of, this association between biases in newscasters' facial expressions and viewers' voting behavior.

I am not objective, make no pretense of being objective. There are a great many things I like and dislike, and it may be that at times some indication of this appears in my facial expression. (David Brinkley, quoted in Fang, 1972, p. 27)

The alleged biases of television newscasters has been a topic of discussion for many years. The study of the verbal content of television news during political campaigns has yielded conflicting results. Some studies have observed biases in favor of particular candidates (e.g., Efron, 1971), whereas other studies have observed no such biases (e.g., Stevenson, Eisinger, Feinberg, & Kotok, 1973). What makes these studies of bias in the news poignant is not the mere possibility that the news might be biased; rather, the interesting, and disturbing, element of this research is the possibility that the biased news might affect those who watch it (cf. Graber, 1980).

In the present investigation, a particularly subtle mode of influence is considered: the effect of the newscasters' facial expressions on the voting behavior of those who view the news. Although facial expressions of newscasters have been studied in the past (Friedman, DiMatteo, & Mertz, 1980; Friedman, Mertz, & DiMatteo, 1980), these earlier efforts did not consider the possible effects of newscasters' biased facial expressions on voting behavior.

Facial expressions have been demonstrated to be powerful and informative social stimuli. There is a considerable amount of evidence in support of the cross-cultural agreement in the encoding and decoding of facial expressions (e.g., Ekman, 1972; Ekman & Friesen, 1975). In general, facial expressions undoubtedly exert a powerful influence on day-to-day social interactions (Kraut & Johnston, 1979). Of particular interest in this context, programmatic research by Lanzetta, McHugo, Sullivan, and their colleagues has begun to examine the effects of political leaders' facial expressions on voters (Lanzetta, Sullivan, Masters, & McHugo, 1985; McHugo, Lanzetta, Sullivan, Masters, & Englis, 1985; Sullivan, Masters, Lanzetta, Englis, & McHugo, 1984). This research has revealed that emotional expressions on the part of a political leader have a direct emotional impact on television viewers.

The two studies reported in this article begin to examine the effects of facial expressions on the part of newscasters. In Study 1, the facial expressions of national network newscasters during the 1984 presidential campaign were studied. The purpose of this first study was to determine whether newscasters did exhibit biased facial expressions during the reporting of that particular political campaign. In Study 2, a telephone survey of television-viewing voters was conducted. The purpose of this second study was to determine if voting behavior seemed to be influenced by the facial expressions of the newscaster watched.

Study 1: Biases in Newscasters' Facial Expressions

Friedman, DiMatteo, and Mertz (1980; Friedman, Mertz, & DiMatteo, 1980) examined the positivity of facial expressions

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that accompanied the television newscasters' references to Gerald Ford or Jimmy Carter during the 1976 presidential campaign. Friedman et al.'s analyses revealed that some newscasters (e.g., David Brinkley, Walter Cronkite, Harry Reasoner) exhibited more positive facial expressions when referring to Carter, whereas other newscasters (e.g., John Chancellor, Barbara Walters) exhibited more positive facial expressions when referring to Ford. Study 1 comprised a replication of the Friedman et al. procedure in all of its essential details. Generally, this required that subjects evaluate the facial expressions exhibited by national network television newscasters during reference to presidential candidates.

Method

Subjects. Forty-five (20 females, 25 males) introductory psychology students at Murray State University participated in this study for optional research participation extra credit.

Procedure. For 8 days prior to the 1984 presidential election, the three national network nightly news programs were videotaped. Only newscasts involving the three regular anchorpersons were of interest (ABC: Peter Jennings; CBS: Dan Rather; NBC: Tom Brokaw). Segments involving correspondents, or programs involving substitute anchorpersons, were not included in this procedure.

From approximately 12 hr of videotaped news, two different types of segments (candidate segments and validity segments) were edited and transferred to the stimulus videotape. Candidate segments involved any reference to either of the two major presidential candidates (e.g., Reagan, Ronald Reagan, The Republican Presidential Candidate, or variations thereof; Mondale, Walter Mondale, The Former Vice President, The Democratic Presidential Candidate, or variations thereof). However, a segment was not included if reference was merely being made to the candidate's family, associates, or campaign; the candidate's name was embedded in a quoted statement made by some other person; or the candidate's name appeared within 5 s of someone else's name.

In addition, a number of validity segments involved the newscaster's discussion of some unequivocally positive event or some unequivocally negative event. As per Friedman et al., the validity segments were included to determine whether subjects could successfully perform this task (i.e., whether there were distinguishable differences in the positivity of newscasters' facial expressions during the discussion of events that would naturally elicit positive or negative emotional reactions).¹

These guidelines produced a set of 37 segments. There were 7 validity segments, one positive and one negative segment for each newscaster (with the exception that there were two negative segments available for Dan Rather; responses for these two negative segments for Dan Rather were averaged together). There were 30 candidate segments, approximately equally distributed among the three networks and between each of the two candidates. Each segment was approximately 2½ s in length, with the appropriate reference (to the candidate or to the positive-negative event) occurring approximately 1½ s into the segment. Segments were edited onto the stimulus videotape in the approximate order of their actual occurrence for each network, with approximately every fifth segment being a validity segment. A number from 1 to 37 was presented on the screen for 5 to 7 s before each segment, identifying the number of the next segment.

Approximately 3 months after the 1984 presidential election, subjects signed up for an experiment entitled, "Judging Facial Expressions." Subjects participated in a classroom in small groups (ranging in size from 5 to 10 people) in the presence of one experimenter. After filling out an informed consent statement, subjects read the instructions while they listened to the audio recording of the instructions at the beginning of the videotape. After dealing with any questions, the experimenter turned off the volume of the television monitor, and the stimulus video-

tape was played while the subjects independently rated the facial expressions exhibited by the newscaster in each segment. Ratings were made on thirty-seven 21-point scales (with the endpoints anchored, *extremely negative* and *extremely positive*). After finishing with the experimental materials, subjects were debriefed and dismissed. There was no indication that subjects were aware of the hypothesis under study.

Results

Validity segments. For each of the three newscasters, one positive validity segment score and one negative validity segment score were analyzed. A 2 × 3 (Valence of Validity Segment: Positive-Negative × Newscaster: Peter Jennings/Dan Rather/Tom Brokaw) analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed a significant main effect for valence of validity segment, $F(1, 264) = 518.448, p < .00001$, a significant main effect for newscaster, $F(2, 264) = 4.104, p = .018$, and a significant Valence × Newscaster interaction, $F(2, 264) = 5.979, p = .003$. The powerful main effect for valence of validity segment was expected: Positive validity segments were associated with higher facial positivity ratings ($M = 15.81$) than negative validity segments ($M = 6.19$). The significant main effect and interaction involving newscasters were not anticipated. However, Newman-Keuls a posteriori pairwise comparisons (Kirk, 1982) revealed no significant differences at the $p = .01$ level of significance other than the obvious main effect for validity segment.

Thus, viewers do appear able to decode the affective information in facial expressions of newscasters who are discussing emotion-laden topics.

Candidate segments. One Reagan segment score and one Mondale segment score were derived for each of the three newscasters from each of the 45 subjects.² A 2 × 3 (Candidate: Reagan/Mondale × Newscaster: Peter Jennings/Dan Rather/Tom Brokaw) ANOVA revealed a significant main effect for candidate, $F(1, 264) = 24.212, p < .0001$, a significant main effect for newscaster, $F(2, 264) = 113.346, p < .0001$, and a significant Candidate × Newscaster interaction, $F(2, 264) = 21.210, p < .0001$. The hypothesis of concern is that a given newscaster might exhibit facial expressions biased in favor of one of the candidates; therefore, a priori orthogonal t tests (Kirk, 1982) were conducted for each newscaster to compare the positivity of facial expressions associated with Reagan segments and the positivity of facial expressions associated with Mondale segments. These a priori orthogonal t tests revealed no significant differences for Dan Rather ($M[\text{Mondale}] = 10.46; M[\text{Reagan}] = 10.37$), $t(264) = .180, p = .4287$, or for Tom Brokaw ($M[\text{Mondale}] = 11.21; M[\text{Reagan}] = 11.50$), $t(264) =$

¹ The validity segments addressed the following topics: Peter Jennings (positive: the encouraging current status of "Baby Fae"; negative: assassination threats of Islamic Jihad); Dan Rather (positive: the encouraging current status of "Baby Fae"; negative: shooting of an embassy, funeral of Indira Ghandi); Tom Brokaw (positive: successful treatment of congenital disease; negative: starvation in Ethiopia).

² There were multiple candidate segments available for each newscaster (a mean of 4.6 Reagan segments and a mean of 5.3 Mondale segments). Separate analyses revealed no significant differences between subjects' ratings of specific segments for a given candidate and newscaster, and so responses were averaged across specific segments to obtain a single index of facial positivity from each subject for each newscaster and candidate combination.

.581, $p = .2810$. However, Peter Jennings exhibited a strong bias in favor of Reagan ($M[\text{Mondale}] = 13.38$; $M[\text{Reagan}] = 17.44$), $t(264) = 8.136$, $p < .000001$.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 can be summarized as follows. Subjects were able to detect differences in positivity of facial expressions of newscasters that occurred during reference to unequivocally positive or negative events. These differences are not based on the verbal content of the newscasters' comments; subjects did not hear any information from the newscasters, but merely rated the facial expressions observed during 2½ s, silent segments.

Regarding facial expressions exhibited by the newscasters while referring to a presidential candidate, some interesting results emerged. Dan Rather and Tom Brokaw did not exhibit any noticeable bias, with both newscasters appearing to be right at or about the midpoint of the 21-point scale for both candidates. However, Peter Jennings did appear to exhibit a strong positive bias in favor of Reagan.

One could try to make the case that Jennings is simply more facially expressive than the other two newscasters. This argument is contradicted by the results for the validity segments. The mean difference between positive and negative validity segments for Peter Jennings (7.97) is not larger than the same difference for Dan Rather (9.38) and for Tom Brokaw (11.54); in fact, this difference is substantially smaller. Thus, Peter Jennings cannot be argued to be more facially expressive.

Another post hoc interpretation of these results might be that Peter Jennings simply has a more positive facial expression overall. This argument is also untenable because Peter Jennings' facial positivity score for the positive validity segment (14.13) was lower than that for Dan Rather (16.16) or Tom Brokaw (17.16). Moreover, Peter Jennings was the only newscaster to exhibit higher facial positivity for a candidate than for the positive validity segment. Thus, it seems clear that Peter Jennings exhibited a facial expression bias in favor of Reagan.

The present results are not a complete and direct replication of Friedman et al.'s procedure. Neither of the two candidates running for the presidency at the time of Friedman et al.'s study was running during the presently studied 1984 election. Moreover, none of the anchorpersons studied during the 1976 election were currently performing as anchorpersons during the 1984 election. Nonetheless, the present results replicate Friedman et al.'s results in the sense that a significant and noticeable bias in facial expressions of a newscaster was observed.

Study 2: Network News Viewing and Voting Behavior

The biased facial expressions on the part of a newscaster might be associated with voting behavior on the part of television viewers who watch that newscaster on a regular basis. For example, voters who regularly watched Peter Jennings may have voted for Reagan more frequently than did voters who watched Tom Brokaw or Dan Rather. Study 2 was conducted in order to determine whether such an association might in fact occur.

Method

Subjects. Subjects consisted of five sets of approximately 40 individuals selected at random from the local telephone books of Murray, Ken-

tucky, Cleveland, Ohio, Rolla, Missouri, Williamstown, Massachusetts, and Erie, Pennsylvania.

Procedure. A simple survey was conducted by telephone in each location during the spring of 1985. The investigators in each location read the following scripted introduction:

Hello, my name is [investigator's name]. I am a student at [institution's name], and I am conducting a telephone survey of [location] residents as part of a class project on television viewing habits. Could I please ask you to answer two questions? All responses will remain completely anonymous.

If the subject declined, the investigator thanked him or her and said goodbye. If the subject consented, the investigator asked the subject the following two questions (in this order):

What major network nightly news broadcast do you watch most often?

ABC with Peter Jennings
CBS with Dan Rather
NBC with Tom Brokaw
None of the above

Which presidential candidate did you vote for in the 1984 presidential election?

Reagan
Mondale
Won't say
Didn't vote

Subjects were then thanked for their help. No record was kept of subjects' names or telephone numbers.

Results and Discussion

The survey responses of subjects in Cleveland, Rolla, Williamstown, and Erie are presented in Table 1. The survey conducted in Murray was not usable, because no one voting for Reagan or Mondale watched ABC with Peter Jennings (the one person in the Murray sample who watched ABC did not vote).

Recall that the results of Study 1 indicated that Tom Brokaw and Dan Rather did not exhibit any bias in facial expression, whereas Peter Jennings did exhibit a bias in facial expressions in favor of Reagan. Therefore, the proportion of subjects who watched NBC or CBS that voted for Reagan was compared with the proportion of subjects who watched ABC that voted for Reagan. The proportions, and the associated Z s for contrasting proportions (Mullen, 1985; Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1985) are also presented in Table 1. Although the effect for each sample is a modest one, each of the contrasts is in the predicted direction: The percent of ABC viewers who voted for Reagan is invariably higher than the percent of NBC and CBS viewers who voted for Reagan. The meta-analytic combination of the results of these separate analyses (weighting each result by its associated sample size; cf. Mullen & Rosenthal, 1985; Rosenthal, 1980, 1984) revealed that the combined results of these analyses were both statistically significant ($Z = 2.5527$, $p = .0053$), and of noticeable magnitude ($Z(\text{Fisher}) = .2316$, $\bar{R} = .2275$, $R^2 = .0518$, $\bar{d} = .4673$).

General Discussion

The results of Studies 1 and 2 indicate that newscasters can and do exhibit biases in facial expressions while referring to political candidates and that such biases are associated with

Table 1
Study 2: Results of Telephone Survey—Percentage of Subjects Voting for Reagan and Mondale

Factor	ABC	CBS + NBC
Cleveland, Ohio		
Reagan		
% voted for	75.0	61.9
Raw frequency	15	13
Mondale		
% voted for	25.0	38.1
Raw frequency	5	8
Z		.912
p		.181
Refused to participate		10
Did not vote		1
Did not watch		0
Sample size		41
Rolla, Missouri		
Reagan		
% voted for	100.0	85.0
Raw frequency	4	17
Mondale		
% voted for	0.0	15.0
Raw frequency	0	3
Z		1.879
p		.030
Refused to participate		4
Did not vote		9
Did not watch		9
Sample size		24
Williamstown, Massachusetts		
Reagan		
% voted for	71.4	50.0
Raw frequency	10	11
Mondale		
% voted for	28.6	50.0
Raw frequency	4	11
Z		1.330
p		.092
Refused to participate		6
Did not vote		1
Did not watch		3
Sample size		36
Erie, Pennsylvania		
Reagan		
% voted for	73.7	50.0
Raw frequency	14	9
Mondale		
% voted for	26.3	47.1
Raw frequency	5	8
Z		1.316
p		.094
Refused to participate		1
Did not vote		4
Did not watch		0
Sample size		36

Note. Refused = number of people who refused to participate. Did not vote = the number of subjects who did not vote for either Reagan or Mondale. Did not watch = the number of subjects who did not watch any of the three network nightly news programs. Sample size = number of subjects who did vote for either Reagan or Mondale, and who did watch one of the network news programs.

complementary voting patterns on the part of viewers. In other words, regular viewing of a newscaster who exhibits facial expressions that are biased in favor of a particular political candidate is associated with an increased likelihood of voting for that political candidate. There are three possible explanations for these results. Either viewing the newscaster's biased facial expressions caused the viewers' voting preferences, or the viewers' voting preferences determined their viewing of biased newscaster's facial expressions, or some third variable accounts for these results. We shall consider each of these possibilities.

The first general explanation holds that the newscaster bias had a causal effect on viewer attitudes, and we consider this explanation to be the most plausible one. It is important to note that these biases in facial expressions were not merely part of a systematic pattern of bias in the news. Analyses of news content during the campaign has indicated that the content of network news coverage was either unbiased or it was biased against Reagan (Clancey & Robinson, 1985), and Jennings in particular exhibited no pro-Reagan bias in what he said. At one level, this may illustrate what Petty and Cacioppo (1985) have labeled the peripheral route to persuasion, that is, persuasion occurring without the deliberate, conscious consideration of arguments.

There are at least two means by which newscaster facial expressions could influence attitudes. First, through repeated vicarious exposure to a conditioned stimulus (the words Ronald Reagan) and a conditioned response (feeling good, as evidenced in a smile), the viewers may acquire a vicariously conditioned positive affective response (cf. Bandura & Rosenthal, 1966; Berger, 1963; Craig & Weinstein, 1965; Vaughan & Lanzetta, 1980; Venn & Short, 1973). The second variation of this explanation invokes the source credibility phenomenon (Aronson, Turner, & Carlsmith, 1963; Chaiken, 1979). Repeated smiling coincident with mention of Reagan's name might be construed as a form of political endorsement. Because a newscaster is typically a credible source, this type of apparent endorsement may be a particularly effective means of influencing viewer's attitudes. The present data do not differentially recommend either one of these two mechanisms.

The second general explanation holds that the initial cause of our results was the preexisting candidate preferences held by television viewers. There are two variations of this explanation. First, the apparently biased newscaster may actually be more sensitive to his viewing audience's political preferences. In other words, Peter Jennings' smiling whenever he talked about Reagan may have been a reflection of, rather than a determinant of, his viewers' preferences for Reagan. This implies a deliberate distortion that runs counter to the tenets of professional journalism. Moreover, deliberate bias as a means of ingratiating oneself with an audience would presumably be done far more effectively by biasing what one says, rather than by biasing facial expressions while keeping news content unbiased. Nonetheless, this explanation is consistent with the present results.

The other variation on the second explanation holds that pro-Reagan viewers tended to choose to watch ABC because Jennings' biased facial expressions were rewarding to them. If true, this explanation would hold great theoretical interest. Recall that ABC exhibited no pro-Reagan bias in news content, and if anything ABC was slightly less pro-Reagan than the other networks (Clancey & Robinson, 1985; Robinson, 1985). For example, the only aspect of election news coverage that consistently favored

Reagan was the preelection polling, and ABC polls often reported Reagan's lead as slightly smaller compared with the other networks. It is difficult to argue, therefore, that pro-Reagan viewers preferred ABC because they were more likely to hear what they wanted to hear (cf. Sweeney & Gruber, 1984). The causal mechanism for this explanation must involve the subtle operation of emotional associative cues, which dictated choice of news program despite the lack of content bias. Thus, Jennings' facial expressions may have reinforced pro-Reagan viewers for watching his news program. In the final analysis, this explanation is quite similar to the vicarious classical conditioning explanation, except that the present explanation is based on an operant conditioning perspective, whereas the first explanation included an element of a classical conditioning perspective. Both accounts suggest a subtle influence of newscasters' facial expressions on viewers' behavior—in the one case by causing the viewers to choose Reagan, in the other case by causing them to choose Jennings.

The third possibility is that pro-Reagan viewers were more likely to watch the ABC network news than the others for some reason unrelated to the bias in Jennings' facial expressions. Although direct causation (as in the two explanations just discussed) is more parsimonious and to us more plausible than indirect, independent causation, there is no way to rule out this possibility definitively.

In conclusion, our results are consistent with a link between newscasters' facial expressions and viewers' voting behavior. The link cannot be explained in terms of obvious bias in the content of news reporting. These results suggest the possibility of a subtle, peripheral type of persuasion. A recent analysis by Iyengar, Kinder, Peters, and Krosnik (1984) suggested that television news may help to define the standards by which presidents are evaluated. These authors observed that "One major implication of our results is that a president's program may be advantaged or completely undone by what happens to come flickering across the nation's television screens" (p. 786). Not only might the success of a particular program be so influenced, the selection of the president by the electorate may itself be influenced by which candidate the newscasters smile upon.

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