



Improving election outcomes through a better understanding of heuristic evaluation of candidates

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abstract

In democracies, the public may assume that people elected to public office are qualified and suited for that office. However, history has demonstrated that this perception can be incorrect. One reason that unqualified individuals win elections is that voters do not always make logical or rational choices. Instead, they often rely on mental shortcuts called *heuristics* to make snap judgments about which candidate would do the best job. Unfortunately, these snap judgments can be inaccurate. In this article, we summarize heuristics commonly used by voters. These heuristics are often activated by candidate attributes such as appearance, age, ethnicity, and other characteristics that are not related to leadership potential. We also propose policy solutions to reduce the chance of incompetent leaders being elected. These policy solutions address the problem through two main strategies: increasing the number of candidates who have the proper qualifications and encouraging voters to evaluate candidates more deeply and deliberately. We suggest four ways to implement these strategies.

Li, M., & Glerum, D. R. (2022). Improving election outcomes through a better understanding of heuristic evaluation of candidates. *Behavioral Science & Policy*, 8(2), 25–44.

This process of election affords a moral certainty that the office of President will seldom fall to the lot of any . . . who is not in an eminent degree endowed with the requisite qualifications.

—Alexander Hamilton

As Alexander Hamilton's words illustrate,¹ in democracies, the public usually assumes that the candidate selected by voters is qualified for office. Office-holding political leaders are expected to make decisions competently, scrutinize and evaluate policy, strategically direct and implement policy, maintain cohesion among constituents, and represent their constituents' interests.^{2,3} However, throughout history, voters have elected individuals who lack the qualities that would make them fit for political leadership. The election of an unfit leader can have drastic consequences: incompetent or inappropriate wielding of influence; an inability or reluctance to do what is best for constituents; or, worse, amoral and destructive leadership and totalitarianism.⁴ For instance, as was true of Adolph Hitler, demagogues rise to power by appealing to voters' negative emotions, such as resentment and prejudice, and are motivated by self-interest and opportunism rather than a desire to fulfill their duties responsibly.⁵

What factors allow incompetent leaders to be elected to office? One factor is that voters may make decisions based on attributes or characteristics unrelated to a candidate's suitability for political leadership. Indeed, psychologists have long recognized that people often do not make logical or rational decisions. Instead, people have evolved to use decisionmaking shortcuts, called *heuristics*, to save time and energy.⁶ In this article, we focus on heuristics activated by several attributes of political candidates. These attributes may make politicians more or less popular among voters but are not necessarily accurate indicators of a political leader's effectiveness.⁷

We first describe the dual-process theory of decisionmaking as a framework for understanding how heuristics affect the way voters choose candidates. Second, we review and discuss the three most frequently studied

categories of characteristics that activate heuristic thinking: (a) demographics, (b) appearance and behavior, and (c) what we call "quasi-qualifications." Last, we introduce several evidence-based policy recommendations to reduce the undesirable impacts of heuristics and improve election outcomes.

Dual-Process Theory & Voter Heuristics

Dual-process theory suggests that people process information via two distinct sets of cognitive systems: System 1, which is rapid, automatic, unconscious, and implicit; and System 2, which is slow, effortful, deliberate, controlled, and systematic.^{8–11} One might assume that voters primarily rely on System 2 processes to evaluate candidates, carefully collecting and analyzing information about the candidates and their qualifications. However, voters often rely equally or more on System 1, using heuristics to make snap judgments about candidates. For instance, voters may have a preconception that good leaders are tall and attractive and thus assume that tall, attractive people are effective leaders. In other words, voters might decide the candidate who looks most like their idea of a leader is the best candidate for office.^{12,13}

Behavioral scientists have postulated that a reliance on System 1 thinking for the selection of leaders could have provided an evolutionary advantage in early human communities.^{14,15} Because System 1 processes are quick, automatic, and less resource intensive than the careful and controlled System 2 processes, they may have been beneficial for rapidly choosing a leader in situations where there was no time to waste, such as when groups faced an attacking tiger or approaching storm. Although System 1 can be useful in picking a leader in these types of immediate-threat emergencies, it can cause problems in the political domain because it can

lead voters to make automatic, snap judgments of candidates based on whether they fit the voter's internal image of a good leader—judgments that can be highly inaccurate.^{13,16,17} Snap judgments can also be based on conscious or unconscious bias against certain characteristics related to ethnicity, race, culture, gender, and appearance. Once made, these judgments are quite resistant to change, because voters tend to search for and accept information confirming their initial judgments.¹⁸ In sum, System 1 thinking may lead voters to elect incompetent or even dangerous people to office on the basis of characteristics that have little to do with effective leadership.

Candidate Characteristics That Activate the Use of Heuristics in Voters

Demographic Characteristics

The term *demographics* refers to the various characteristics of a population, such as income or health status. In the following text, we consider the candidate demographic categories that most often activate heuristic thinking among voters: gender identity, race and ethnicity, and religious affiliation.¹⁹

Gender Identity. Even though research has shown that women are just as qualified for political office as men are, they (as is the case with LGBTQ+ politicians) are routinely underrepresented in political office.^{20,21} One explanation for this disparity may be that voters use biased heuristics based on the idea that good leaders are masculine. As a result, female candidates often must convey a higher level of ambition and competence than male candidates do to overcome barriers to political office.²²

Indeed, research demonstrates that voters recognize candidates' demographic characteristics first and then quickly make stereotyped assumptions on the basis of those demographics.^{23,24} For instance, voters assume that female candidates will advocate for social services relevant to mothers and children, such as childcare, education, health care, and poverty reduction. In contrast, voters assume male candidates will emphasize economic

“voters may make decisions based on attributes or characteristics unrelated to a candidate's suitability for political leadership”

development, a strong military, crime reduction, national security, immigration reform, and the deficit.^{25,26}

Research demonstrates that when voters watch men give political speeches, they associate nonverbal behaviors that indicate dominance (such as assertiveness and expressiveness) with positive leader-like attributes (such as toughness, confidence, and decisiveness). However, voters view these same behaviors negatively when displayed by women because they violate typical gender role stereotypes. Women are more likely to receive votes when they convey a composed demeanor, aligning with the gender role stereotype.²⁷ Although voters rank all women as less suitable for office than childless men or fathers, they rank women without children at the bottom of the list, below female candidates who are parents, presumably because childless women seem less feminine than mothers.²⁸ This stereotype-based heuristic thinking also occurs in the evaluation of political leaders and judges. For instance, Justice Antonin Scalia's children were present and welcomed at his 1986 confirmation hearing, but little time was spent connecting his parenthood to his abilities as a justice. However, during his protégé Amy Coney Barrett's confirmation hearing in 2020, legislators continuously inquired about her motherhood, pointing out she was “tireless,” “remarkable,” and a “superstar.”²⁹ Conflicting heuristics puts female candidates in the bind of trying to display traits that voters consider masculine (confidence, dominance, assertiveness) while remaining sufficiently feminine to comply with their gender role.

Race & Ethnicity. Despite tremendous racial and ethnic minority population growth in the

United States, very few politicians belong to racial or ethnic minorities.³⁰ Using heuristics based on stereotypes, voters may decide that racial majority candidates are more conservative, intelligent, experienced, or trustworthy and choose to vote for them instead of racial minority candidates.³¹ These heuristic tendencies are even stronger when voters are cognitively taxed by voting on numerous issues at once. Even socially liberal voters, who traditionally advocate for racial equality, support racial majority candidates more than racial minority candidates when cognitively depleted.³²

Religion. In general, voters find religious candidates more trustworthy (as long as they practice a majority religion) and are less likely to vote for atheist candidates.³³ In the United States, religion matters more to White voters than to voters from other racial groups, and White voters expect religious candidates to be more conservative.³⁴ Voters tend to view candidates who share their religious beliefs as ideal leaders and candidates from other religious traditions as less ideal. For instance, Muslim candidates suffer electoral penalties among non-Muslim voters, especially from White voters.³⁵ Similarly, Muslim voters from certain Muslim groups typically do not vote for non-Muslims or candidates from a different Muslim group.³⁶ When religion interacts with partisanship, the situation becomes even more complicated. For example, identifying a candidate as an evangelical increases Republican support and decreases Democratic support for that candidate.³⁷

The Changing Effects of Demographics on Heuristic Decisionmaking. A large body of evidence demonstrates that the demographic characteristics of candidates have historically influenced voter decisions. However, newer evidence shows that biased decisionmaking based on demographic characteristics has diminished in recent years. For instance, according to several studies, voters are no longer as biased against female candidates as they were in the past, and their stereotypical views of gender have weakened.³⁸ Instead, voter evaluations of candidates appear to be more reliant on party affiliation.³⁹ As an extreme example, a 2008 study

of New Hampshire's primary voters revealed that candidates' gender, race, religion, and age did not affect voters' decisions.⁴⁰ Some research even suggests that voters are more willing to vote for women and Black candidates than they have been in years past.⁴¹ However, some scholars contend that biased preconceptions of leadership persist and that these studies do not reflect actual changes in voting behavior. Instead, these studies may reflect participants' desire to give socially acceptable responses to researchers.⁴²

Appearance & Behavior

The appearance and behavior of candidates inform heuristics that voters use, even though many of these characteristics are unrelated to leadership potential.

Facial Appearance. Facial attractiveness positively affects voting preferences,⁴³ particularly for female candidates,⁴⁴ an effect that holds even after researchers control for voters' visual and cognitive functioning.⁴⁵ Even though appearance has nothing to do with how effective or successful they will be as a political leader, physically attractive candidates often have an electoral advantage.⁴⁶

Voters intuitively make quick inferences about candidates merely from their facial appearance. In some studies, participants were shown pictures of politicians and asked to rate the politicians on dimensions such as competence, trustworthiness, likability, and attractiveness. Participants made these judgments spontaneously and almost instantaneously (in as little as 33 milliseconds),⁴⁷ which precluded System 2 thought processes as explanations for their ratings.⁴⁸ Even when given more time to think through their evaluations, voters still defaulted to their rapid automatic judgments.⁴⁹ These results are not surprising if people have no other information about the candidates available to them. But a more worrisome finding is that these quick responses to images of faces influence voting decisions and predict actual election outcomes. For instance, competence ratings made after a one-second exposure to congressional candidates' faces accurately predicted 68.8% of the Senate races in 2004.²⁶

Studies with children suggest that these automatic judgments are perhaps more hardwired than learned. In one study, researchers showed pairs of faces (winners and runners-up) from the 2002 French parliamentary elections to hundreds of adults and children and asked them to evaluate the faces: Adults were to choose who seemed more competent, whereas children were asked to select the person they wanted to be the captain of their boat. The decision patterns were nearly identical: Adults' judgments correctly predicted election results 72% of the time, and kids' choices accurately predicted 71% of the races.⁵⁰

Research demonstrates that perceptions of competence that are based on facial appearance may be the primary determinant of electoral success across countries and cultures. The precise facial characteristics underlying competence ratings are not well understood, but research has shown that voters often associate mature faces (older, as opposed to having a baby face), familiar faces (in the sense that voters prefer faces that look about the same age as theirs), and attractive faces with competence.⁴⁵ Voters tend to favor candidates with a mature appearance and see them as trustworthy, dominant, and competent.⁵¹ As such, voters prefer older candidates, especially in times of stability.⁵²

Height. An abundance of research has linked height with perceptions of leadership qualities such as dominance, status, and authority.⁵³ Not only are taller candidates more likely to win the popular vote and be reelected,⁵⁴ but members of the public view incumbents as being taller than they estimated these same people to be before they were elected.⁵⁵ Ratings of presidential greatness by experts in presidential politics correlate with presidential height, as do various ratings of leadership qualities, which suggests that this bias is pervasive.^{56,57}

Voice Pitch. Voice pitch affects voter preferences, with voters seeing candidates with low-pitched voices as being more dominant and competent than those with high-pitched voices.⁵⁸ Voters favor both male and female

“competence ratings made after a one-second exposure to congressional candidates' faces accurately predicted 68.8% of the Senate races in 2004”

candidates with low-pitched voices,⁵⁹ even in candidates running for more “feminine” leadership positions, such as roles that are congruent with the stereotype of women as caretakers.⁶⁰ Researchers have uncovered a significant negative relationship between higher voice pitches and electoral success in democratic elections held throughout the world. Candidates with low voice pitch (1 standard deviation below the mean) had a 64.9% predicted probability of winning their election compared with 34.5% for candidates with high-pitched voices.⁶¹

Nonverbal Behavior. Like the more passive demographic and appearance-related characteristics we have discussed, political candidates' nonverbal behavior can also influence voter judgment through heuristic thinking. More specifically, voters may automatically evaluate candidate behaviors that are distinctive and displayed consistently as representing personality traits.⁶² Indeed, studies have consistently shown that voters prefer politicians who behave in ways that suggest they are stable, extroverted, conscientious, open-minded, honest, charismatic, and disagreeable.^{63,64} However, when it comes to predicting actual leadership effectiveness, disagreeableness and extroversion may not be reliable markers. Extroverts tend to be narcissistic and disagreeable people tend to be socially dominant, and narcissism and social dominance have been linked to autocratic tendencies and unethical behaviors.⁶⁵

Although behavior may be a relatively accurate window to personality,⁶⁶ behavioral attributions

made by voters are susceptible to manipulation by candidates when they adopt behaviors designed to activate heuristic thinking. Because candidates are nearly always in the public view, they may practice using certain verbal and nonverbal behaviors with the specific intent of influencing voter preferences.^{67,68} Conversely, biased media portrayals or attack ads may distort the appearance and behavior of a targeted candidate, subtly influencing voters' perceptions of the candidate.^{69,70}

Quasi-Qualifications

Voters may rely on various accomplishments as indicators of candidates' suitability for public office, such as a candidate's education, past political experience, and political connections. These qualifications often do not directly relate to a candidate's knowledge of how to lead, govern, and direct policy effectively. Therefore, they may not translate into leadership effectiveness, at least not to the same degree as more relevant qualifications, such as political skill and leadership abilities.

In other words, a candidate's many degrees, years of experience in politics, and good connections do not automatically make that candidate the best-suited person for the job at hand, even though voters often infer that they do. Given that these characteristics are only indirect and potentially inaccurate indicators of future effectiveness, we refer to them as *quasi-qualifications*: characteristics that lead to bias if accepted *prima facie* and without careful consideration of their relevance to the political office sought.

Education & Experience. Education and experience robustly predict candidates' election chances. For instance, the 2019 U.S. House of Representatives' incoming cohort was the most educated legislative cohort in its history, with 72% of elected officials holding a graduate degree and 95% holding a bachelor's degree.⁷¹ As we noted earlier, voters often equate educational attainment and experience in politics with competence and political skill, but they are imperfect proxies on their own as signs that a candidate will be effective.⁷²

Experience, for its part, may contribute to the *incumbency advantage*, which refers to voters' preference for candidates who already hold the office or another one. Voters assume that candidates who hold or have held office acquire substantial knowledge and expertise while in office,⁷³ regardless of their performance during their tenure.⁷⁴ This well-known advantage has led to the derogatory term "career politician" being coined for use against incumbents by opposing candidates with less political experience as well as in academic literature and the popular press.^{75,76} The term insinuates that these politicians have narrow occupational backgrounds and life experiences that potentially insulate them from and thus render them unable to effectively represent their constituents. Arguably, there is nothing inherently wrong with a career politician (imagine accusing an expert who has dedicated their life to the study of an important phenomenon of being a "career scientist"). In any case, voters should be encouraged to evaluate the skills and traits needed to be successful in a particular public office rather than make snap judgments based on the number of years an incumbent has been in office.

Despite the intuitive link between education, experience, and political effectiveness, research in this area has confirmed that education and experience are not necessarily reliable indicators of effectiveness—the relevancy of a candidate's education and experience matters. Concerning education, an examination of cross-national data found that college-educated leaders performed on par with non-college-educated political leaders and were not more likely to lead their nations to prosperity, pass more legislation, or avoid corruption.⁷⁷ Some researchers discovered that mayors with political experience but no college education were as effective as college-educated mayors at reducing local debt.⁷⁸ Other studies found no relationship between prior political experience and in-office performance for U.S. presidents, as rated by presidential researchers.⁷⁹ Studies have demonstrated that some experiences, specifically those similar to presidential experiences, relate positively to presidential performance.⁸⁰ In

contrast, experiences unrelated to presidential responsibilities either do not affect or negatively affect presidents' performance.⁸⁰ Depending on the public office in question, politically relevant degrees, such as public administration or economics, may be more beneficial for political leader performance than, for instance, medical degrees.⁸¹ However, it may be difficult for voters to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant types of education and experience. For that reason, they may rely on quick System 1 thinking rather than evaluating the relevancy of the education and experience to a particular office.

Social Capital. Another quasi-qualification is the candidate's social capital. In this context, we define *social capital* as the social resources and networks that can potentially provide advantages to a political candidate or leader.

One form of social capital that benefits candidates is belonging to a political family, also known as a *political dynasty*. This term describes an often multigenerational group of politicians who are connected by marriage or blood.⁸² Dynasties are common in many democracies and offer a significant electoral advantage.⁸³ On average, between 1789 and 1858, 11% of legislators belonged to political dynasties. This trend is decreasing: Since 1966, only 7% of legislators have belonged to political dynasties. However, U.S. Congress members holding office for more than one term are 40% more likely than those who held office for only one term to later have a relative in Congress, according to a 2009 study.⁸⁴ Dynastic politicians occupy a more significant share of positions in developing democracies (for example, over 40% of nationally elected positions are dynastic in the Philippines) than in developed democracies such as Canada (with less than 4% of nationally elected positions being dynastic).⁸⁵

Such phenomena can be attributed to name recognition,⁸⁶ as knowledgeable voters and the uninformed alike are more likely to vote for a candidate whose name is more familiar than that of another candidate.⁸⁷ In addition to name recognition, electoral advantages enjoyed by dynastic politicians include financial resources,

education, family networks, material wealth, and political connections from their predecessors.⁸⁸ The extra resources, support, and name recognition are especially beneficial for women who run for office,⁵ with female legislators in U.S. Congress being nearly three times more likely than men to come from dynastic families.⁸⁹

Of course, dynasties' political power might reflect what Stephen Hess refers to as the "best butter" of politics,⁹⁰ a term used in part to describe inherited skills and abilities that lead to electoral success. However, although dynastic politicians perform better than nondynastic politicians in some studies,⁹¹ they perform equally well or worse in others.⁹² Perhaps the most convincing piece of evidence that inherited characteristics do not account for electoral success comes from Ernesto Dal Bó and his colleagues, who demonstrated that dynasty formation depends primarily on the length of time a dynasty's founder remained in office. The longer one holds political office, the more one's dynastic successors can leverage the founder's name recognition, financial resources, and social network connections.⁸⁴

Connections Among Characteristics That Activate Heuristics

So far, we have described categories of characteristics that can activate heuristic thinking in voters—namely, demographics, appearance and behavior, and quasi-qualifications. We have also discussed the evidence that the populace tends to rely on these characteristics when choosing who to vote for and that these characteristics are relatively unrelated to leader effectiveness. Demographics, appearance, behavior, and other characteristics are not mutually exclusive: Voters tend to associate some characteristics with others, and these associations can affect voters' choices.⁹³ For example, gender and facial appearance are connected because masculine faces are stereotypically seen as dominant and mature.

Furthermore, candidate evaluation depends in part on the salience of the characteristic in question.⁹⁴ Appearance and behavior, for instance, can be perceived differently by

different observers. Moreover, candidates can change their appearance and behavior across situations.⁹⁵ In addition, research shows that heuristics activated by appearance and behavior can be either overridden or amplified by demographic characteristics such as gender and race or ethnicity. This modification may be more likely to occur when the demographic characteristics reflect leadership stereotypes, such as the idea that the best leaders are older White men. These characteristics activate heuristic decisions in some voters that may override momentary perceptions of incompetence stemming from appearance or behavior.⁹⁶ This research suggests that demographic characteristics may take precedence over other cues.

Some characteristics and the attributes they represent in voters' minds are more relevant to voters than others. For example, research has demonstrated that people believe intelligence and dedication are two of the most crucial traits of effective leaders.⁹³ This finding could explain why voters put so much stock in education (which could indicate intelligence) and political experience (which could indicate dedication), even though not all types of education or experience correlate with effective job performance.

Policies to Reduce the Negative Effects of Heuristic Decisionmaking in Elections

Given the global rise of populism and the increasing use of social media, which tends to amplify heuristic thinking over careful evaluation,⁹⁷ it is important for elected officials and policymakers to consider policies that could combat the negative effects of heuristic decisionmaking among voters. Many researchers in the behavioral sciences have conducted studies to test approaches to improving election outcomes. These include setting up systems to ensure that the people running for office are competent (so that even when heuristics dominate decisionmaking, the winners will still be reasonable choices) and taking actions that encourage voters to evaluate candidates more deeply and deliberately. On the basis of the first line of research, we recommend establishing minimum qualifications for holding offices. And,

on the basis of the second line of research, we recommend providing voters with decision-making aids, instituting ranked-choice voting (which calls on voters to give more thought to their choices), and increasing the diversity among candidates (to normalize candidate diversity and thus reduce the use of heuristics based on biased stereotypes). We elaborate on these ideas next and in the sidebar Policies to Improve Election Outcomes by Reducing the Role of Heuristics.

Encourage Minimum Qualifications for Leadership

Research from the behavioral sciences has demonstrated across occupations and positions that requiring minimum qualifications for a given job helps improve a job candidate's likelihood of being effective once in the position or office.⁹⁸ Most people employed in health care and law hold licenses or certifications or meet other minimum qualifications that confirm that they have the requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities to fulfill their responsibilities competently,⁹⁹ so why not political leaders?

For some levels of the U.S. government, officials have already recognized the need for minimum qualifications in leadership positions of trust. The Founding Fathers, for example, specified in the Constitution that a candidate for the presidency must be at least 35 years old, a natural-born citizen, and a resident of the United States for at least 14 years. Other positions have had qualifications for future office holders drawn up in the wake of sometimes catastrophic real-life leadership failures: After the Federal Emergency Management Agency's disastrous response to Hurricane Katrina, for instance, a Senate committee noted that the agency's leader "lacked the leadership skills . . . needed for his critical position."¹⁰⁰ In response, legislators passed the Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006 that stipulated minimum leadership qualifications, such as demonstrated emergency management ability and knowledge of homeland security, for the head of the agency.¹⁰⁰ Requirements related to knowledge, skill, competence, and expertise are also in place for membership on various commissions and boards and for employment

Policies to Improve Election Outcomes by Reducing the Role of Heuristics

The problem: Voters often rely on shortcuts in thinking, called *heuristics*, when evaluating candidate running for office and thus make snap judgments about them. These reflex responses—detailed in the main article—can result in voters electing people who are not suitable for office.

Following are policies that can reduce the negative effects of heuristic decision-making among voters:

Encourage minimum qualifications for candidates.

- Requiring minimum qualifications may prevent or reduce the chances of voters electing unsuitable candidates even when voters rely on heuristic decisionmaking.
- The qualifications themselves may help educate voters about what attributes are important for successful leadership in particular political positions.

Implement voting aid applications.

- Applications that educate voters about candidates' qualifications and positions may help voters evaluate candidates more deeply and move beyond heuristic decisionmaking.

Alter voting processes.

- Ranked-choice voting may impede voters' reliance on heuristics because it can force voters to compare a group of candidates rather than making a binary choice.

Increase diversity among candidates.

- Increasing diversity may offer two benefits: more opportunities to find truly qualified people and fewer opportunities for heuristic decisionmaking based on biases. Ways to increase diversity include:
 - » Intentionally expanding recruitment pools beyond traditionally overrepresented groups.
 - » Implementing quotas.
 - » Identifying and promoting role models to inspire people from underrepresented groups to run for office.

in leadership positions across the U.S. government.⁹⁵ For example, a candidate for the director of the Institute of Education Sciences within the Department of Education would need subject matter expertise in research, statistics, and evaluation; competence and skill in these areas (demonstrated through research productivity); and proven scientific project management abilities.

Imposing minimum qualifications for political office in the United States would likely be controversial. Indeed, John Rawls, one of the most influential political philosophers of the

21st century, suggested that being able to hold public office is an unqualified right of all citizens.¹⁰¹ However, in the wake of modern lapses of leadership, the public and politicians alike may be ready to take a serious look at the idea of minimum qualifications.

So what might minimum qualifications look like in a political context? We have already described how graduate degrees and experience are imperfect and unreliable predictors of political leader effectiveness. However, we also noted that relevance plays a key role, with politically relevant degrees (such as public administration

or political science) and experiences holding higher potential for resulting in successful leadership.⁸¹ Graduate degrees in public policy, passing the bar exam to practice law, or other forms of demonstrated professional competence, as reviewed earlier, may indeed predict leadership effectiveness when required for the particular political office in question. Moreover, educational attainment reflects intelligence,¹⁰² and intelligence has been consistently linked to presidential greatness for decades.¹⁰³ However, it is important to note that the form of intelligence associated with presidential greatness is broader and more extensive than what a standard IQ test would assess and covers intellectual curiosity, brilliance, and openness.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, we hesitate to recommend using an IQ test for minimum qualifications for office. Regardless, a candidate's job-relevant degree that reflects intellectual curiosity, cognitive ability, and the responsibilities of the office in question holds more promise as an indicator of the candidate's ability to be effective in that office than do the candidate's years of experience or education when these are not specifically relevant to the elected position.

Specifying minimum qualifications for an office and the rationale for those qualifications may help voters distinguish among relevant and irrelevant degrees, licenses, certifications, and experience. Further, when political party representatives nominate candidates, they would do the public a service if they evaluated aspiring candidates' qualifications objectively and critically. These decisionmakers should undergo training to distinguish relevant qualifications from irrelevant qualifications such as medical degrees or quasi-qualifications that maintain the appearance of competence but may be entirely unrelated to political effectiveness. Just because a candidate has written a best-selling book does not mean the person is competent, skilled, and fit for leadership. We caution, though, that completely ignoring educational attainment and political experience would probably be a mistake, because although we advise against relying on those characteristics on their own as indicators of competence, they may play some role in future effectiveness.

In addition, entities independent of political parties could establish credentialing organizations to evaluate relevant minimum qualifications of candidates. These organizations could operate alongside candidate development programs that prepare candidates for public office, such as the National Democratic Training Committee and the Republican National Convention Campaign Management College. Party leaders could consult these credentialing organizations in determining which candidates may be most qualified to run for office. Independent entities could also publish the findings of their objective evaluations to assist voters with their candidate evaluations. Independent credentialing organizations could reduce the influence of candidate impression management, which strives to make candidates seem qualified for office even when, objectively, they are not.

Implement Voting Aid Applications

As we have shown, heuristics and System 1 thinking can lead to voters endorsing incompetent candidates. However, voters may rely less on these processes if provided with tools that encourage a more systematic and rational decisionmaking approach.¹⁰⁵ Several informal tools known as *voting aid applications* (VAAs) have emerged within the last decade to serve this purpose.¹⁰⁶ For instance, the U.S. government suggests that voters consult BallotReady (<https://www.ballotready.org>), which enables voters to compare candidates on education, experience, and position statements before deciding for whom to cast their vote. Separately, more than 56 million people have taken the "I Side With" and "Vote Compass" quizzes to match their stances on various political issues with those of the candidates.¹⁰⁷ In another example of a decision aid, the League of Women Voters (LWV) published a pamphlet in 1976 that encouraged voters to compare leadership abilities among candidates, fact-check political campaigns, be aware of the advertising and marketing techniques being used to influence voters, and examine campaign finance practices.¹⁰⁸ Today, the LWV maintains a nonpartisan website that provides unbiased information about candidates across the entire country. Local LWV chapters

also sponsor events in every election cycle that enable community members to meet candidates and hear their stances on various issues.

An effective VAA (a) does not rely on unnecessary or easily manipulated information; (b) focuses on attributes directly relevant to voters' decisions; and (c) improves the breadth, validity, and quality of information presented to voters. Although many VAAs focus solely on partisan policy platforms, the ideal VAA would focus on assessments of both competence and policy platforms.

Assessments of competence should contain information about candidates' relevant education and experience. These assessments should not rely on candidate photographs, irrelevant education or experience, or cherry-picked quotes. As for policy platforms, research suggests that position statement wording and presentation can manipulate or directly influence voters' decisionmaking processes.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, careful attention should be paid to presenting the issues using objective language not designed to persuade and including objective information reflecting candidates' stances on issues,¹¹⁰ such as prior voting records, consistency in voting records, and candidate endorsements by special interest groups.

In general, we agree with others in the behavioral sciences that VAAs hold great potential for assisting voters in making informed decisions. However, the trade-off is that processing the added information requires substantial cognitive resources, time, and effort from voters, who may not be used to spending that kind of time and energy on this task. Continued research is needed to refine and further improve the capabilities of VAAs.¹⁰⁶

Alter Voting Processes

Single-member plurality voting systems, in which people vote for only one candidate and the winning candidate represents all constituents, are extensively used worldwide.¹¹¹ Research has demonstrated that these voting structures systematically disadvantage racial minorities and women.¹¹² Such systems, for

instance, are vulnerable to manipulation by politicians who create gerrymandered districts that dilute the power of the vote among a particular group, such as a racial minority.

One alternative, *ranked-choice voting* (RCV), allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference, from favorite to least preferred. RCV may be one way to improve the quality of election decisions.¹¹³ For example, it may reduce bias because ranking the candidates requires voters to compare multiple candidates, a task that increases the likelihood that voters will deeply engage with information about candidates rather than applying snap judgments.¹¹⁴

Over half of the 50 U.S. states use RCV in primaries, special elections, party elections, local elections, and absentee ballots. However, only two states (Alaska and Maine) use it statewide and in presidential elections.¹¹⁵ RCV methods vary in how many candidates are ranked and the process for handling runoffs. Many of its proponents suggest it can result in fairer election outcomes that more accurately represent the will of the people¹¹⁶ and can encourage more civil and less incendiary campaigns that are focused on the issues.¹¹⁷ Research suggests that RCV methods may also result in less partisanship in certain circumstances, with candidates and their parties needing to reach beyond their traditional voting bases to obtain a majority of votes.¹¹⁸

Of course, RCV methods have some potential limitations. First, research suggests that voters may view some forms of RCV as complicated and less desirable than more familiar methods.¹¹⁹ Therefore, we suggest that any adoption of RCV methods be accompanied by a campaign to familiarize and educate constituents on how RCV works. Second, when large numbers of candidates appear on ballots, RCV may result in *truncated* or *exhausted* ballots—that is, voters fail to fill out the entire ballot. These exhausted ballots can result in a candidate being elected even though they did not receive the majority of votes.¹²⁰ For this reason, it seems preferable to apply RCV only when voters are open to the idea and understand how it works and

to limit the number of candidates to be ranked. Although adopting RCV may be an ambitious policy goal, RCV has been successfully used in many local, state, and national elections, as well as in countries worldwide. Therefore, we believe that RCV shows promise for reducing the use of heuristics by voters.

Increase Diversity Among Candidates

A more diverse slate of candidates may offer fewer opportunities to activate heuristic thinking in voters. In addition, enlarging the pool of potential candidates beyond people from traditionally elected groups may offer more opportunities to find truly qualified people.

Expand Recruitment Pools. Party officials, also prone to heuristic thinking, often select or nominate candidates that match their idea of how a political leader should look, sound, or act. Because this bias exerts its effect early in the election process, the pool of possible candidates ends up being limited, creating a missed opportunity for political officials to identify, select, and support the most qualified candidates. For instance, reflecting on the U.S. Republican Party's lack of diversity, Corry Bliss (a top Republican strategist in the 2018 effort to maintain control of the House of Representatives) noted, "We as a party learned the hard way that in today's world we need candidates other than boring old white people. . . . We need candidates with compelling biographies, compelling messaging, and candidates that reflect the voters who offer a better perspective of the issues of the day."¹²¹ Furthermore, candidates from underrepresented groups are arguably more suited to represent citizens from those groups because they are likely to have a deeper understanding of their needs and wishes—a view held by Faiz Shakir (Senator Bernie Sanders's campaign manager), who noted in 2019 that the campaign wanted "a team that looks like America."¹²²

Policymakers should also focus on developing potential candidates' interest and competence in running for office. Through mentorship and community outreach, political recruiters could help develop and encourage aspirations for political office among people from

underrepresented groups who otherwise would not run.

Some notable efforts are underway. For example, Rina Shah started the Catalyst Political Action Committee to recruit a more diverse pool of Republican candidates for U.S. Congress.¹²³ University initiatives, such as the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, also actively advocate for recruiting people from underrepresented groups into the political sphere.¹²⁴

Implement Candidate Quotas. Much of the data in support of quotas relate to gender. Many countries and political parties have adopted quotas to combat the demographic underrepresentation that results in part from voter heuristics in candidate evaluation. Gender quotas have helped lead to comparatively high legislative representation of women in more than 60 countries worldwide.¹²⁵ Some scholars suggest that political parties can help successfully implement gender quotas by taking the initiative to require that a certain percentage of underrepresented people be among the pool of candidates.¹²⁶ Other scholars suggest limiting the percentage of the overrepresented gender on the ballot.¹²⁷

Formal quota laws in some countries have increased the number of candidates from underrepresented groups by mandate, with sanctions for noncompliance.¹²⁸ In the United States, quota mandates have not been put into practice, and scholars suggest they are not likely due to several constitutional challenges.¹²⁹ However, quotas have become more prevalent in other countries around the world, and they have increased the number of women in elected positions. Further, quotas may lead to positive changes in politicians' impact in their respective countries. For example, female politicians in countries where gender quotas were in place significantly increased the efficacy of policies targeting women and households, the efficiency of municipal administration, and the passing of women's rights laws.¹²⁸ Although quotas may be controversial, broadening candidates' diversity may be a way to circumvent bias embedded in heuristics used by voters.

Identify & Promote Role Models. Role models can serve as powerful signals that encourage qualified people from underrepresented groups to run for office.¹³⁰ For example, President Barack Obama's election encouraged many racial minority members to run for office.¹³¹ Spotlighting underrepresented role models in political office may both lead more candidates from underrepresented groups to run for office and also have trickle-down effects on leadership aspirations in other areas. For example, women's political leadership representation may also influence business leadership representation. That is, female political leaders normalize the idea that women can be leaders, whether in politics or in other domains, such as business and industry.¹³²

One way to establish and promote political role models for underrepresented groups is to publish and publicize ranked lists that showcase the most effective or influential leaders. For instance, INvolve, a global network that advocates for diversity and inclusion, partners with Yahoo! Finance to annually publish lists that showcase executives, future leaders, and advocates who are women (the **heroes** Role Model Lists, which are found at <https://heroes.involverolemodels.org>), who represent racial and ethnic minorities (the EMpower Role Model Lists, which are found at <https://empower.involverolemodels.org>), or who are members of the LGBTQ+ community (the OUTstanding Role Model Lists, which are found at <https://outstanding.involverolemodels.org>). The lists highlight the successes of underrepresented group members and inspire others to follow their lead.

Conclusion

Voters often use heuristic shortcuts to make snap judgments about candidates instead of focusing on candidates' qualifications and policy platforms. These heuristics are often based

"We have proposed several policies to reduce the negative effects of heuristic decision-making among voters"

on superficial information, such as appearance, leading to the election of unqualified people as political leaders. We have proposed several policies to reduce the negative effects of heuristic decisionmaking among voters and increase voters' chances of electing effective political leaders. These policy suggestions should mitigate the negative effects of heuristic decisionmaking by encouraging voters to make more deliberate and informed decisions and by increasing the competence and diversity of political candidates, which in turn should reduce the chances of electing incompetent leaders even when voters make poorly informed snap judgments. Although the policies may be challenging to implement at the national level in the United States, many localities, states, and countries have successfully enacted them with beneficial outcomes.

At the very least, voters and political professionals need to recognize that heuristics—often based on biases—strongly affect how people decide to cast their votes. Recognizing the role heuristics play is the first step in developing policies that will help voters elect greater numbers of competent public servants.

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