

# MARKETING U.S. PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES: HEIGHT MATTERS

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## ABSTRACT

*Election day outcomes of U.S. presidential political campaigns depend on “the issues” combined with related views and abilities of the candidates, at least according to firmly held ideals about voters in a democracy. In that context the respective marketing campaign staff attempt to position their candidate’s record of views and abilities to match with preferences of the majority of voters. At the same time many factors, some more salient than others, influence if not determine outcomes. This article accordingly recommends research with focus on one of the most visible factors of all candidates: height component of a candidate’s physical appearance.*

*Despite discomfort and denial associated with notions that superficial appearance factors such as a candidate’s height may influence votes, it is more probable than not. This current article advocates hypotheses to be tested through experimental research methodology to study the potential impact of candidate’s height upon election day outcome. It also reports exploratory research conducted with survey research to gain preliminary insight.*

*This study’s “height data” reveal that these 2011 survey respondents three years after the 2008 U.S. presidential election perceived candidate Barack Obama (to be slightly over 6 feet tall, at 6’0.29”) to be substantially taller (4-1/4 inches) than candidate John McCain (to be slightly under 5 feet 8 inches tall, at 5’7.98”). Consistent with the general research question whether height determines election day outcome, among these survey respondents 53% voted for Obama and 35% for McCain. Next to be determined, through experimental research methodology, whether the connections evidenced in these exploratory research data are merely correlated or causal and, if causal, the causal direction.*

## INTRODUCTION

Election day outcomes of U.S. presidential political campaigns result from many factors, some more salient than others. Successful marketing behind these outcomes depend on myriad details connected to extensive strategies and tactics, efforts and actions, and deliveries of communications (Ceaser, Busch, and Pitney, 2009; Todd and Gawiser, 2009; Miller, 2008; Nagourney, 2008; Talbot, 2008). If a U.S. presidential campaign wins or loses on election day centers, of course, on the candidate herself/himself both in isolation and relative to the other candidate(s).

Marketing and management of successful U.S. presidential campaigns substantially consider realities and perceptions of all the candidates. While reality should determine perception, and often does, the bottom line is that perception--whether accurate or not--is probably more important than reality for the candidates. It is nonetheless, voters’ perception(s) on election day that determine election day outcome for the triumphant and not triumphant candidate. In that context the respective presidential campaigns attempt to position their candidate’s record of accomplishments, current qualifications, and future views, to match up more favorably with preferences of the majority of voters compared their opponent candidate(s).

A deep-rooted ideal throughout presidential elections worldwide suggest that “the issues” combined with “the candidates’ views and abilities” drive election outcomes (Erikson and Wlezien, 2008; Wenfang, 2007; Bogaards, 2007; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000). If true, electorates then cast votes based on awareness and understanding of important issues combined with the respective experience and perspectives of the candidates. Outcomes of presidential political election campaigns then depend on the electorate’s perception about ability to deal with important issues by each candidate, particularly concerning differences between the final two major candidates. This presidential election scenario exists, rather ideally, throughout voting populations.

However, particularly at the general election stage for U.S. presidents (compared to the primary election-nomination stage), a quite different scenario can be reasonably hypothesized. For example, factors not common to issues, views, and abilities likely influence effectiveness of marketing efforts by presidential candidates to persuade voters, as one experiment, rather than survey, has shown (Huber and Arceneaux, 2007). From a creditable but non-formal research perspective based on expert opinion concerning the upcoming 2012 U.S. presidential election, *The Wall Street Journal* published a front-page article stating, “But the clothes also carry a political message. Wearing less-tailored clothes helps... Studies show that people under 25 don't trust men in ties...” (Williamson, 2011).

As discomfiting as it might be to acknowledge, reality might be that substantial numbers of individuals cast their votes while being unknowing, naïve, or unmindful about the issues of greatest importance and the candidates’ respective, actual, views and abilities. The voters alone cannot be blamed for this likely state of affairs. Campaign practices of modern day elections in democracies such as the United States contribute mightily, despite what might be considered highbrow ideals proclaimed publicly to the contrary.

It may well be that voters at the general election campaign stage of U.S. presidential campaigns possess little and possibly no understanding, or even significant awareness, of each candidate’s true ability to deal with issues important to society. Instead, other factors about each candidate may determine the general electorate’s vote; which might be theoretically understandable and predictable as a simplifying decision making action in the context of confusing, contradicting communications from and about the candidates leading up to election day. Accordingly, factors and dimensions most visible and seemingly most certain may be equally or even more influential to these voters. Meeting these criteria of visibility and (seeming) certainty are the components that comprise physical appearance of the candidates as seen by voters.

Despite the discomfort caused by such thinking, mass media pollsters and comedian late-night television talk show hosts rather routinely demonstrate this finding in their non-scientific survey reports. Accordingly, Winston Churchill once said that, “the best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter” (Brainy Quote, 2011).

### **HYPOTHESES, ADVOCATED**

Questions arise quickly from the above introductory text. Is it true, that substantial numbers of the American electorate cast their votes in U.S. presidential elections due to matters other than issues only recognized to be of generally accepted importance? If yes, then what factor or factors determine these votes? If multiple factors determine these votes, what are those factors and their relative importance?

Without focus on a finite number of factors the related questions in themselves become unmanageably numerous. This article accordingly recommends research with focus on one of the most visible factors of all U.S. presidential candidates: the height component of a candidate's physical appearance.

To investigate the influence of height of a U.S. presidential candidate, and that of her/his opponents, requires research methodology that employs experiments rather than surveys. Robust published research conducted by scholars representing diverse fields and methodologies document that people generally are not aware, refuse to admit, and/or deny that physical appearance, including such components as physical height of another person, influences their perceptions, assumptions, or actions (as summarized by Hamermesh, 2011; Patzer, 2008; Hatfield and Sprecher, 1986).

Within the above referenced research, published data convincingly documents that "actions speak louder than words" concerning height. Whatever people might say or deny when surveyed, experiments show that people actually think more favorable perceptions, make more favorable assumptions, and react/interact more favorably when seeing taller individuals rather shorter. Accordingly, while survey research methodology likely can provide valuable, initial, exploratory research data concerning this question about height of U.S. presidential candidates, data providing conclusive insight into this potential relationship require experimental research designs.

To encourage research about the connection between height of a U.S. presidential candidate and win-loss consequences on election day, the following hypotheses are put forth. In contrast to the ideal notion about "only issues" determining for whom an individual casts her/his vote, it is reasonable to advocate formal research to test hypotheses as follows:

Hypothesis #1 -- Substantial numbers of voters for U.S. president cast their votes as a function of the height of the final two major contenders, more so than as a function of their views and abilities.

Hypothesis #2 -- U.S. presidential voter actions due to height occur at the general election stage, more so than at the primary election-nomination stage.

Hypothesis #3 -- Height of each candidate relative to that of the other candidate for the final two major U.S. presidential candidates influences election day outcome, more so than the height attractiveness of each candidate separately.

Hypothesis #4 -- Effects of height upon voter choice affect female candidates for U.S. president more so than male candidates.

Hypothesis #5 -- Voters who cast their votes in U.S. presidential elections as a function of the height of candidates, deny such if asked directly.

Although it can be discomfoting to ask the questions hypothesized above, let alone to learn the reality if different from ideal, these hypotheses are reasonable for varied reasons. First, these hypotheses are consistent with anecdotal observations of modern culture, intuition, scientific theory, and existing, albeit indirectly pertinent, robust research findings. Second, respective knowledge can be valuable information when planning and executing campaign management/marketing strategies and tactics, along with necessary efforts and actions, and deliveries of communications. Third, such knowledge contributes generally to a more informed citizenry.

A fourth reason why these hypotheses represent valid questions to be tested by research regards analogous findings that looking more physically attractive, which components include taller heights rather than shorter heights, cause or lead to greater success (cf., Rhode 2010; Etcoff, 1999). Among the consequences of appearances representing greater physical attractiveness is success in the workplace (Saranow, 2004). Even research conducted by the American Federal Reserve Bank has confirmed that greater physical attractiveness translates into greater workplace successes (Engemann and Owyang, 2005). Individuals with appearances of greater physical attractiveness, with height a substantial contributing factor, receive higher incomes during their working years, experience greater total lifetime incomes, and in the process achieve further and faster advancements than their less physically attractive, less tall, counterparts Hamermesh, 2011; Bennett, 2010; Hamermesh and Biddle, 1994).

### **METHODOLOGY, CURRENT EXPLORATORY RESEARCH**

To begin to study formally the potential impact of candidate's height within the win or loss outcome on election day for U.S. presidential candidates, this current article reports exploratory research conducted to gain preliminary insight. These initial data were collected through survey methodology with paper-and-pencil questionnaire 2011, three years after the 2008 U.S. presidential election. The data collection tool (questionnaire) focused on the final two major contenders: Barack Obama and John McCain.

Respondents who fully completed the research questionnaire comprised 150 adults living in the U.S. Midwest, mostly employed full-time, representing a wide range of marital and parental status. They lived and worked in or around (in adjacent surrounding suburbs) the same large city selected to collect these initial survey data. All agreed voluntarily to complete the research questionnaire before or after each attended their university night class the evenings that researchers administered the survey. Although these respondents may represent a traditional "research convenience sample," they also represent actual voters and potential voters directly pertinent to the 2008 U.S. presidential election.

Researchers disguised the questionnaire's interest concerning whether candidates' height (separately and relative to the other major contender/s) determines win-loss outcomes on election days for U.S. presidential candidates. Accordingly, the questionnaire embedded only one height question (#15) among a total of 22 questions and placed it toward the end of the questionnaire.

### **FINDINGS, EXPLORATORY RESEARCH DATA**

The goal and guide for collecting these initial survey data was exploratory research. Likewise, research applied basic statistical analyses to these initial data with intent to establish a base from which later experimental research explores potential causal relationships between candidate's physical attractiveness and outcomes of U.S. presidential elections. In addition to the findings now summarized, the appendix section of this article presents verbatim the questions with their full response data.

The total sample of 150 respondents who completed the questionnaire for this exploratory research project were 64 percent (n=96) female and 31 percent (n= 47) male. Mean age of respondents was 24.5 years. Ethnically, Caucasian/White comprised 61 percent, African American 14 percent, Asian 10 percent, Hispanic 7 percent, Native American 1 percent, and 7 percent chose not to self-identify their ethnicity. Respondents' marital status was 80 percent single including divorced and single, 14 percent married including cohabitating, and 6 percent chose not to reveal. Self-reported annual household income among the respondents ranged from less than \$10,000 to greater than \$200,000 with a calculated mean of \$52,333.

The 2008 U.S. presidential election was the first time to vote in such an election for 53 percent of the sample respondents. Among these individuals 35 percent voted for candidate John McCain (McCain) and 53 percent voted for candidate Barack Obama (Obama). For the survey respondents concerning McCain, 56 percent indicated they “knew enough about the candidate and what he stood for.” In contrast, concerning Obama, 72 percent indicated they “knew enough about the candidate and what he stood for.” The ratio was approximately the same when respondents were asked whether they “feel the candidate had a clear message”: 42 percent said “yes” regarding McCain and 64 percent said “yes” regarding Obama.

One questionnaire item asked specifically about perceived height of each of the candidates. Based on respondents’ replies to the question “15. *Likely Height (in feet and inches) – please best guess as necessary,*” mean height calculated to be 67.98 inches (5 feet 7.98 inches) for McCain and 72.29 inches (6 feet 0.29 inches) for Obama. Although the questionnaire did not ask comparison of the two candidates’ heights, respondents perceived Obama slightly more than 4.25 inches (calculated mean value) taller than McCain.

## DISCUSSION

This exploratory research suggests the need and potential information for more thorough and more developed research. Connection appears to exist to sufficiently warrant scientific testing of formal hypotheses about whether the height, or lack thereof, of a candidate and that of her/his competitors significantly impact election day outcomes for U.S. presidential campaigns.

Data from this current exploratory research duplicate or otherwise parallel the fact that election day outcome clearly favored candidate Obama in the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign. To begin, consider the official final vote count published January 22, 2009, by the United States Federal Election Commission (United States of America Federal Election Commission, 2009). Their report titled “2008 Official Presidential General Results” shows that candidate Obama received 67.84 percent (365) of the 538 total electoral votes while candidate McCain received 32.16 percent (173). Of the 131,257,328 total “popular votes” cast, 52.92 percent (69,456,897) were cast for Obama and 45.66 percent (59,934,814) were cast for McCain.

Results of these exploratory research data equivalent to comparable official vote counts published by the U.S. government provide a form of external validity of the former. For example, 53 percent of the respondents to this exploratory research questionnaire indicated they voted for candidate Barack Obama while only 35 percent indicated they voted for candidate John McCain. Extrapolation of findings pertinent to political campaigns, from the tomes of physical appearance research not focused on political campaigns suggest why height of the candidates might have impacted significantly the 2008 U.S. presidential election day outcome.

People prefer taller people, across the United States and around the world. Psychology and sociology research confirms this reality. That research spans more than 40 years since a paper presentation presented at the 1971 annual conference of the American Sociological Association formally expressed this preference with the term heightism (Feldman, 1971). More recently, a best-selling book published in 2005—*Blink, The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*, by Malcolm Gladwell—includes data from a survey of approximately one-half of all CEOs (Chief Executive Officers) of the Fortune 500 companies (Gladwell, 2005). Although U.S. government data show the average adult American man stands 5’9” tall, those survey data found the average CEO is about three inches taller at about 6 feet. Furthermore, less than 4 percent of adult American men are at least 6’2” tall, but 30 percent of the CEOs are 6’2” or taller, with 58 percent at least 6 feet tall.

Specific to U.S. presidential campaigns and candidates, a *Time* magazine article published 40 years ago with quote from sociologist Saul Feldman states, "...since 1900 the taller of the two major presidential candidates has always been sent to the White House, even when the margin was Richard Nixon's one-inch advantage over Hubert Humphrey's 5 feet 11 inches (*Time*, 1971). More recent data and analysis reveal that as of 2003 the taller of the two final candidates won ten of the past twelve United States presidential elections (more than 80 percent), that is, until 2000 when Al Gore Jr., at 6'1", lost to George W. Bush at 5'11" (Mathews, 2003). However, even that election was, by popular vote, in favor of the taller candidate with 543,895 more votes, overridden by the electoral college system used in American presidential elections. In addition, parallel with outcomes for the cited presidential elections, tabulation of the 1990 United States Senate political campaigns revealed the taller candidates won twenty-four of the thirty-one elections (more than 75 percent).

Data collected for this exploratory research specific to the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign show the same height effect as documented above. Clearly, the taller of the two major final candidates won on election day. This questionnaire's respondents' "best guessed" Obama's height to be somewhat over 6'0" (6'0.29" calculated mean value) and McCain's height to be very slightly under 5'8" (5'7.98" calculated mean value). Although the questionnaire did not ask respondents to compare the height of the two candidates, their separate, non-comparative assessments placed Obama at a substantial 4" taller than McCain. Height perceived by the voters and potential voters is the focus of this research and not actual height. Nevertheless, concerning actual height, public sources most frequently reference Obama as 6'2", 6'1-1/2", or 6'1" and McCain as 5'9"; with Obama correspondingly 5 inches, 4-1/2 inches, or 4 inches taller than McCain (Shepard, 2011).

Whether height of the final two candidates caused candidate Obama to win the 2008 U.S. presidential election over candidate McCain cannot be ascertained here. Certainly, this exploratory research indicates that the candidate perceived as taller of the final two candidates by voters and non-voters alike, resulted in total votes cast to be in favor of that candidate. Conversely, the candidate perceived as shorter of the final two candidates received substantially fewer votes in his favor. If future research determines the relationships to be causal rather than merely correlational, the next question might be to determine direction of the causal relationship. For example, does perception of taller and shorter heights cause intended voting behavior respectively, or intended voting behavior concerning the final two major candidates cause respective height perceptions of these candidates. As expressed earlier in this article, additional research, most likely in the form of one or more experiments, will hopefully further explore the height-success relationship concerning U.S. presidential campaign election day outcomes.

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**APPENDIX: Survey Sample Composition, Details**

This appendix presents information details about the individuals who constitute the questionnaire-survey sample. Also presented here, a subset of questions excerpted verbatim from the questionnaire actually administered along with a summary of the respective responses. That longer questionnaire included additional questions unrelated to the topical focus of this current report and used, in part, to disguise the questionnaire’s interest concerning candidate physical attractiveness. These subset questions, along with summary of their respective responses, are those most pertinent in terms of indirect and direct relationship to the topical focus of this research report.

1. Did you vote for a presidential candidate in the 2008 election?

<b>Yes</b>	48.00% ( 72)
<b>No</b>	52.00% ( 78)
<b>Total</b>	100.00% (150)

2. If you voted, was this your first time to vote in a national election for a presidential candidate?

<b>Yes</b>	52.78% (38)
<b>No</b>	47.22% (34)
<b>Total</b>	100.00% (72)

3. If you answered yes to question #1 above, for which candidate did you vote?

<b>McCain</b>	34.72% (25)
<b>Obama</b>	52.78% (38)
<b>Other</b>	00.00% ( 0)
<b>Do not wish to reveal</b>	12.50% ( 9)
<b>Total</b>	100.00% (72)

*Concerning your knowledge before the election about the two most major candidates:*

8. Do you feel that you knew enough about the candidate and what he stood for?

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>McCain</b>	56.00% ( 84)	44.00% ( 66)	100.00% (150)
<b>Obama</b>	72.00% (108)	28.00% ( 42)	100.00% (150)

9. Do you feel that the candidate had a clear message?

	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>McCain</b>	42.00% ( 63)	58.00% ( 87)	100.00% (150)
<b>Obama</b>	64.00% ( 96)	36.00% ( 54)	100.00% (150)

*At the time you decided to vote, or not vote, in the 2008 presidential election, please indicate your thoughts at that time in regard to the following personal characteristics of the two most major candidates – (Please indicate your best guess if you did not know the actual numbers):*

15. Likely Height (in feet and inches) – please best guess as necessary:

Candidate McCain – Feet: \_\_\_\_\_, Inches: \_\_\_\_\_

Candidate Obama – Feet: \_\_\_\_\_, Inches: \_\_\_\_\_

Candidate McCain Height	
6'0"	08.00% (12)
5'11"	06.00% ( 9)
5'10"	17.33% (26)
5'9"	03.33% ( 5)
5'8"	11.33% (17)
5'7"	17.33% (26)
5'6"	08.00% (12)
5'5"	03.33% ( 5)
5'4"	03.33% ( 5)
5'2"	03.33% ( 5)
5'1"	01.33% ( 2)
No Answer	17.33% (26)
Total	100.00% (150)
Mean Height	5'7.98" (67.98")

Candidate Obama Height	
6'5"	03.33% ( 5)
6'3"	08.00% (12)
6'2"	11.33% (17)
6'1"	08.00% (12)
6'0"	31.33% (47)
5'11"	03.33% ( 5)
5'10"	11.33% (17)
5'9"	03.33% ( 5)
5'8"	02.66% ( 4)
No Answer	17.33% (26)
Total	100.00% (150)
Mean Height	6'0.29" (72.29")

*Information about Yourself:*

[Respondents' own demographic information]

18. What is your gender?

Male	31.33% ( 47)
Female	64.00% ( 96)
No Answer	04.66% ( 7)
Total	100.00% (150)

19. What is your Age?

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Do not wish to reveal [  ]

39 years	03.33% ( 5)
38 years	02.00% ( 3)
34 years	03.33% ( 5)
31 years	03.33% ( 5)
27 years	06.00% ( 9)
26 years	06.00% ( 9)
25 years	06.00% ( 9)

23 years	17.33% (26)
22 years	19.33% (29)
21 years	22.00% (33)
Do Not Wish to Reveal	11.33% (17)
Total	100.00% (150)
Mean Years	24.54 years

20. What is your ethnic background?

<b>Asian</b>	10.00% (15)
<b>African American</b>	14.00% (21)
<b>Caucasian/White</b>	61.33% (92)
<b>Hispanic</b>	06.66% (10)
<b>Native American</b>	00.66% ( 1)
<b>Pacific Islander</b>	00.00% ( 0)
<b>Do Not Wish to Reveal</b>	07.33% (11)
<b>Total</b>	100.00% (150)

21. What is your marital status?

<b>Single (including Divorced Single)</b>	80.00% (120)
<b>Married (including Cohabiting)</b>	14.00% ( 21)
<b>Do not wish to reveal</b>	06.00% ( 9)
<b>Total</b>	100.00% (150)

22. What is household income level?

<b>\$ 0 to \$ 10,000</b>	11.33% (17)
<b>\$ 10,001 to \$ 25,000</b>	08.00% (12)
<b>\$ 25,001 to \$ 50,000</b>	19.33% (29)
<b>\$ 50,001 to \$ 75,000</b>	14.00% (21)
<b>\$ 75,001 to \$ 100,000</b>	12.00% (18)
<b>\$ 100,001 to \$ 150,000</b>	03.33% ( 5)
<b>\$ 150,001 to \$ 200,000</b>	01.33% ( 2)
<b>\$ Greater than \$ 200,000</b>	00.66% ( 1)
<b>Do Not Wish to Reveal</b>	30.00% (45)
<b>Total</b>	100.00% (150)
<b>Mean Household Income</b>	\$52,333.33