

Rising to the Height in Presidential Voting

by Michael Curtis

Predictions are always perilous, especially about the future. Pollsters, either professional organizers or on behalf of their candidates, are understandingly often imperfect in explaining how and why individuals vote the way they do and the reasons for their decision.

Most of the appraisals by pollsters and commentators on voting intentions and beliefs are serious and based on a mixture of and different combination of factors. Among those factors are religion and degree of religious observance, race, age, income data, occupation, geographical location, length of residence, education level, previous political inclination, party affiliation, current national and foreign issues, sex, and marital status, and social pressure.

Other forecasts of U.S. presidential election results are less serious or playful. One is based on the outcome of the Washington Redskins' (Redskins Rule) football team's last home game. Another suggests that the candidate with more letters in the last name is likely to win.

Now, a new scholarly study suggests that pollsters and prognosticators have generally neglected to evaluate one factor in political behavior: the height of the person being questioned. Similarly, scholars have not often assessed the degree of political success in relation to height.

The study co-authored by Sara Watson, assistant professor of political science at Ohio State University and Raj Arunachalam published in June 2016 the *British Journal of Political Science*, does provide an ingenious and unexpected answer about voting intentions. The study, based on research of almost

10,000 British voters, found that taller people, both men and women, are more likely to support conservative positions and to vote for conservative candidates than shorter people. The finding was true of both genders, but twice as true for men as for women.

The taller the person, the more likely he or she will support conservative positions. More precisely, the study found that a one percent increase in height increases support for conservatives by 0.6 percent and the likelihood of voting conservative by 0.5 percent. The increase was 0.8 percent for men, and 0.4 percent for women.

Ms Watson and her colleague were not satisfied with the usual political science theory about the relationship between voting and income, a theory that has had mixed results and contradictory findings because income fluctuates from year to year and there is no totally definite answer to the relationship between economic well being and political opinions.

Watson explains that previous research has found that taller people earn more than shorter individuals, so there is a link between height, income, and opinion. Other studies have suggested that taller adults have jobs of higher status and, on average, earn more than other workers. Watson's study found that a ten percent increase in income tended to increase the likelihood of voting conservative by 5.5 percent.

In a sense this argument is familiar since some economists and anthropologists have related height to economic success and well being. Watson herself assesses that an extra inch in height was associated with an extra £350 of income.

Yet the study shows that the link between height and political voting was true irrespective of other factors that are usually used to explain voting inclinations.

Of course, other factors do help explain political opinions

and likely voting inclinations. One study for example shows the relationship between boredom and extremism. Human beings have a need to counteract negative experiences in their search for meaning, and therefore resort to extreme behavior and support for radical or anti-governmental causes.

In making their decision all U.S. voters will examine the different positions of the two major presidential candidates, Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, on a host of political, economic and cultural issues. One calls for restriction of taxation, and a generally free market: the other is more inclined to call for more government regulations of the market. One does not favor abortion or gay marriage: the other mainly approves of gay marriage and holds that abortion should not be illegal. One supports more spending on the military: the other tends to call for reduction in military spending. The two differ, though sometimes with qualification, on issues such as immigration, the death penalty, and on the tension between social concern and individual rights.

Yet, will the views of voters on these differences be more significant than the question of their height? It is a truism, though perhaps a myth, that a crucial factor about results of past presidential elections has been "heightism," the view that tall individuals are more likely to win the election than are shorter candidates. In addition, the taller ones, who are also taller than the average person in the same birth cohort, are more likely to be reelected.

Since 1950 the taller presidential candidate has won two-thirds of the time. This may be due to the belief that taller people are more intelligent, have better communication skills, are more dominant, are more formidable physically, can impose their views more easily, and are therefore more likely to become real leaders.

Nevertheless, do presidential elections and other political results bear out the importance of "heightism?" The evidence

is mixed. The tallest U.S president was Lyndon Johnson, at 6' 3½" an inch taller than Abraham Lincoln and George Washington, but James Madison was only 5'4". French President Charles de Gaulle was 6'5", but Napoleon was only 5'6".

In the 2012 election, Barack Obama was 6' 1" while Mitt Romney was taller at 6'2". George W. Bush at 5'11½" beat both John Kerry at 6'4" and Al Gore at 6'1". In the democratic primaries, Hillary Clinton beat the taller Bernie Sanders at 5'11". Some of the disturbing but influential players in the world today are short: Korea's Kim Jong II is 5'2", Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is 5'2", and Vladimir Putin is 5'7".

Of the candidates in the present presidential election, Hillary Clinton is either 5'6" or 5'7" (calculations vary), while Donald Trump is 6'2". But before any conclusion can be drawn from this fact or prediction made about the outcome of the presidential election, it is wise, as Sara Watson reminded us, that income and height may play a role in voting decisions and in rulers, but they are not political destiny. There is a world elsewhere.