

Male candidates with deep voices pull more votes

New study says voters prefer male candidates to have low-pitched voices. No word yet on female voices -- although Margaret Thatcher did try to deepen her own delivery.

Christina Montgomery | Posted: Nov 14th, 2011

Heading for the voting booth Saturday? Turns out the way you mark your ballot doesn't depend entirely on what you think of the candidates' positions and leadership abilities.

It turns out, according to a new study out of McMaster University in Hamilton, that you're also swayed by how deep a voice the candidates have. The male candidates, anyway. How female candidates' voices affect us is next up for the researchers -- although they do hint that former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher made an effort to lower her own voice once in power.

The Canadian Press has the story on the new study:

TORONTO -- The pitch of your voice appears to matter in the political trenches, at least according to new research that suggests voters are drawn to candidates with more sonorous tones.

The study conducted at McMaster University in Hamilton and published Monday in the journal *Evolution and Human Behavior* used recordings of nine U.S. presidents going back to Harry Truman.

Future studies will look at female candidates, as well as Canadian politicians, researchers said. U.S. presidents were used this time because the researchers were following precedent: several previous studies had looked at American leaders to determine perceptions -- for instance, of facial masculinity.

The team used computer software to manipulate the voices found in online archival recordings at Michigan State University, creating a higher-pitched version and a lower-pitched version of each.

"There's been a lot of work done on perceptions of politicians in other domains, you know, physical attractiveness and facial masculinity, and we just wanted to look at it in a domain that hadn't been studied yet, which was voice pitch," says lead author Cara Tigue, a doctoral candidate in the department of psychology.

The 125 subjects who participated in this portion of the study were asked to listen to both versions of the voice and express their preferences on a variety of dimensions, such as trustworthiness, leadership, intelligence, dominance, intelligence and attractiveness.

Overall, the participants favoured the lower-pitched voices.

The subjects were also asked whom they would prefer to vote for in peacetime, and in times of war.

"In the wartime scenario, (vocal) qualities related to physical prowess, such as dominance ... really trumped perception of integrity in terms of predicting voting behaviour," Tigue said.

Previous research has found that men's voices that have a lower pitch are perceived as more dominant, she said, and other studies have found that people can accurately assess physical strength from the voice.

"So we think that people are paying attention to these types of cues when they're choosing a lower-pitched voice."

In a second study of men's voices -- this one didn't involve U.S. presidents -- 40 other participants also showed a preference to vote for a person with a lower-pitched voice.

The researchers conclude it is possible that artificially lowering one's voice pitch in audio recordings could help candidates gain votes.

Tigue said the findings on lower-pitched speech are probably something that political strategists have been aware of for a long time.

"There's some anecdotal evidence that (former British prime minister) Margaret Thatcher ... went through voice training to actually speak in a lower-pitched voice," she said.

"I really just think that it just suggests that men with lower-pitched voices may have some sort of advantage. I don't know what political strategists will decide to do with that information."

Toronto voice coach Jay Miller, whose clients have included politicians and managers, said he's not surprised by the study results because "we get a sense of substance, and a groundedness from that deeper sound."

"We tend to associate lower voices with strength, confidence, authority, warmth and so in my experience, people are definitely more attracted to ... voices that have depth in them."

He said people are really taken with the way that U.S. President Barack Obama speaks, and he noted that he liked the voice of former NDP leader Jack Layton.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper also has "a decent voice," he added.

On the female front, one current female client in management tends to speak in a small, high voice that sounds like a girl's, Miller said, and "a lot of what we're trying to do here is help her relax her jaw and her tongue, and open up the channel a little bit more, so the voice from the body comes out, and not just the voice from the face."

But that involves changing muscle memories that began forming around the age of 18 months, and it takes conscious work to change habits, Miller noted.

As for voters, Tigue said the findings provide voters with information about how certain perceptions could influence them.

"But we don't want to make any recommendations about what people should or shouldn't do when they're voting," she added.