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# Panu Poutvaara Beauty in Politics

# INTRODUCTION

Good-looking people earn more money (Hamermesh and Biddle 1994), are treated better by other people (Langlois et al. 2000), and achieve higher status (Anderson et al. 2001). To test whether beauty provides an advantage also in politics, Niclas Berggren, Henrik Jordahl and I collected photos of more than 1,900 political candidates in Finnish elections. We then had the photos evaluated by respondents living outside of Finland and linked evaluations of beauty with electoral results. By collecting evaluations from people outside of Finland we avoid the risk that respondents' evaluations of a political candidate's beauty are influenced by existing opinions of the candidate or her party. In Berggren et al. (2010) we showed that good-looking candidates indeed have an electoral advantage, and that this relationship holds for both female and male political candidates. This relationship holds also if controlling for education or occupation.

In recent years, there has been a boom in research on candidate appearance and electoral success, and the finding that photo-based evaluations help to predict electoral outcomes has been confirmed around the world. Some researchers have collected evaluations of beauty or attractiveness, and others of perceived competence. The link between appearance and electoral success has been established in Australia (King and Leigh 2009), Brazil and Mexico (Lawson et al. 2010), Denmark (Laustsen 2014), Finland (Poutvaara et al. 2009; Berggren et al., 2010), France (Antonakis and Dalgas 2009), Germany (Rosar et al. 2008), Ireland (Buckley et al. 2007), Japan (Rule et al. 2010), Switzerland (Lutz 2010), Britain (Banducci et al. 2008; Mattes and Milazzo 2014), and the United States (Todorov et al. 2005; Ballew and Todorov 2007; Olivola and Todorov 2010; Stockemer and Praino 2015). Poutvaara (2014) provides further references on the evidence showing that facial features predict success in politics, business and the military.

After the link between candidate appearance and electoral success was established, an important further question was whether that link is causal. Lenz and Lawson (2011) compared American voters who differed in terms of their political knowledge and in how much they watched television. As one would expect, they showed that the positive relationship between votes and an appealing appearance is most pronounced among voters with low political knowledge who also watch a lot of TV. Ahler *et al.* (2017) carried out a field experiment in which the treatment group received ballots that included candidate photographs, while the control group did not receive photographs. They found that voters in their treatment group were considerably more likely to vote for a candidate with an appearance advantage. These studies indicate a causal relationship between looks and electoral outcomes.

The political consequences of the role of beauty in politics depend on whether there are systematic differences in the looks of political candidates representing different parties. If such differences are at hand, they would tilt electoral outcomes towards the party or party bloc with better-looking candidates. Given the prominent role of politics in modern states, in terms of taxes, redistribution and public provision of various goods, this could have considerable economic consequences. In Berggren et al. (2017), we present a theory and provide an empirical analysis of the beauty differences between political parties on the left and on the right. Our main result is that conservative politicians look better and voters reward it. Our focus is on economically conservative politicians, representing parties that are less favorable towards redistribution. The rest of this article summarizes our findings and discusses their implications.



Panu Poutvaara ifo Institute and Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich

# THEORY ON WHY CONSERVATIVE PARTIES HAVE BETTER-LOOKING CANDIDATES

Our theory suggests that politicians on the right look better and that voters on the right value beauty more in a low-information setting. We take as our starting point the beauty premium in the labor market - the well-established finding that beauty entails a higher income (Hamermesh and Biddle 1994). Since good-looking people earn more, they have less to gain and more to lose from redistribution. Fong (2001), and Alesina and Giuliano (2011) have shown that people with higher expected lifetime income are less likely to support redistribution. Together, these insights indicate that good-looking people are more likely to support political parties that embrace economic conservativism. A more general psychological mechanism could also play a role. Namely, as good-looking people are treated better, they are more likely to perceive the world as a just place, adopt conservative values and reject calls for radical change. A frequent reason for people to sympathize with the left is a perception of the world as unfair, and such feelings could be triggered by seeing that better-looking people are more successful, even though they do not appear very competent or hardworking.

In our theoretical model, there are two parties, L on the left and R on the right. We analyze voters' reactions to beauty within each party. Candidates thus compete against other candidates within the same party. The setting could be a proportional election with personal votes, or a party primary in which the party candidates for the general election are selected. Voters differ in their ideology. Candidates differ in their beauty and in their ideological congruence. Ideological congruence is modelled as a probability of the politician voting according to the party program if elected, instead of switching to supporting the other party's program. Such deviations may take alternative forms. An ideologically incongruent politician may switch to the other party during the electoral term, or stay in the party in which he or she was elected, but to refuse to follow its program. In European countries, incongruence would more likely be associated with changing party membership. In the United States, there have been several politicians, especially in the Senate, who have adopted a line differing from the party line.

We assume that informed voters observe a candidate's ideological congruence, but uninformed voters do not. Instead, uninformed voters use the candidate's beauty as a cue when forming an expectation on the candidate's ideological congruence. As beauty is associated with conservatism, the expected congruence of a politician running in party R increases in beauty, while the expected congruence of a politician running in party L decreases in beauty. At the same time as uninformed voters use beauty as a cue for ideology, both informed and uninformed voters may value beauty generally. Such a general appreciation of beauty could reflect a positive halo effect, of beautiful people being perceived more positively also in other dimensions. Some voters could also derive satisfaction from supporting good-looking candidates or watching them later in television. Voters could also expect that good-looking politicians are more effective in politics, either because they are more successful in persuading other politicians or are treated better by other politicians or the media. If the media tends to invite good-looking politicians, these have an advantage in getting their message through. This could be an argument to support them even for voters who do not care about beauty itself. As for the halo effect of good-looking people being perceived more positively, this could arise from hard-wired biological mechanisms. Already Darwin (1871) pointed out biological mechanisms behind the appreciation of beauty. In Berggren et al. (2010) we also show that evaluations of beauty, competence, intelligence, likability and trustworthiness are positively correlated.

We define the *beauty premium* as the rate at which a political candidate's vote share increases in his or her beauty. Our model predicts that as long as there are some uninformed voters, the beauty premium is larger for political candidates in party R. The reason is that uninformed conservative voters value beauty both in itself and as a cue for conservatism. Among uninformed voters in party L, beauty has two counteracting effects: a general valuation of beauty on the positive side, and a concern that beautiful candidates are more likely to sympathize with a conservative agenda on the negative side. Therefore, it is a priori unclear whether the overall beauty premium should be positive or negative among uninformed voters on the left. If all voters would be informed, then the beauty premium should be the same among politicians in party L and in party R, provided that their supporters value beauty in itself equally.

# **MEASURING BEAUTY**

In order to test our hypothesis that politicians on the right look better than politicians on the left, we made

use of the same data on Finnish politicians that we used in Berggren et al. (2010). In that survey, 2,513 respondents living outside of Finland were shown four randomly chosen photographs of Finnish political candidates, two of them men and two women. The respondents were from outside of Finland to ensure that the candidates were not recognized. Most respondents were from the United States (32 percent) or Sweden (31 percent), followed by France (9 percent), Germany (8 percent) and Denmark (5 percent).

Each respondent was shown one photograph at a time, and was also asked to indicate if he or she recognized the person in the photograph. None of the respondents living abroad recognized a candidate correctly. Our main question was:

What is your evaluation of the physical appearance or attractiveness of this person compared to the average among people living in your country of residence?

> Very unattractive (1) Below average (2) Average (3) Above average (4) Very handsome or beautiful (5) Cannot say/Prefer not to answer

For the data analysis, the replies were coded from 1 to 5, as indicated above. The survey included 1,356 facial photographs of candidates. The average number of evaluations per photo was nine. 684 photos were of women and 673 of men. 575 were from the 2003 parliamentary election and 782 from the 2004 municipal elections. Respondents were informed that they were evaluating political candidates, but were not given any other information about the photographs. Importantly, all photographs had been used by the political parties on their campaign posters, so these were the same photographs that voters had seen. We measured a candidate's beauty as his or her average evaluation among all respondents who did not abstain (abstention was rare when evaluating beauty).

We also collected photographs of all members of the European Parliament, and recruited 296 Mechanical Turk ('MTurk') respondents from the United States, each of them evaluating 99 photographs, using the same question. None of the respondents recognized any of the MEPs.

Beauty evaluations of American politicians were collected in a survey in which each of 19 respondents evaluated 301 candidates running in Senate elections from 2000 to 2008 and 248 candidates running in gubernatorial elections from 1995 to 2006. We used the same photos as Todorov et al. (2005) and Ballew and Todorov (2007), generously shared with us by Alexander Todorov. We excluded Barack Obama and all responses in which the respondents claimed to recognize the candidate.

Finally, for Australian politics we rely on data from King and Leigh (2009), who asked four Australian respondents to rate the physical attractiveness of 286 candidates in the 2004 election to the federal House of Representatives. This data was generously provided by Andrew Leigh.

# A BEAUTY GAP ON THREE CONTINENTS

We first confirmed our hypothesis that politicians on the right look better than politicians on the left in both municipal and parliamentary elections in Finland, for all candidates together and separately for both males and females, as shown in Table 1. This detailed table was presented in 2015 working paper version of our paper.

After establishing that politicians on the right are better looking in Finland, we proceeded to test this elsewhere. We confirmed that politicians on the right

#### Table 1

#### Average beauty evaluations of Finnish candidates

Election type	Municipal	Parliamentary
Candidates on the right	2.89 (0.71)	2.93 (0.62)
p-value of difference	0.000	0.000
Candidates on the left	2.59 (0.61)	2.70 (0.67)
Female candidates on the right	3.08 (0.79)	3.06 (0.67)
p-value of difference	0.000	0.000
Female candidates on the left	2.63 (0.67)	2.82 (0.74)
Male candidates on the right	2.68 (0.53)	2.78 (0.51)
p-value of difference	0.045	0.002
Male candidates on the left	2.56 (0.60)	2.56 (0.56)
Total No. of candidates	780	575

Notes: Candidates on the right belong to the National Coalition Party, and candidates on the left belong to the Social Democratic Party or to the Left Alliance (none of the respondents recognized any of the candidates). One observation is the average evaluation of one candidate. Standard deviations are in parentheses. P-values are from a t-test of equal means between candidates on the left and on the right.

Source: Berggren et al. (2015).

# Table 2

	Beauty advantage (%)	Data source
Australia	32***	King and Leigh (2009)
European Union	25***	Own data
Finland	41***	Own data
United States	14**	Own data

Notes: 'Beauty advantage' is defined as the difference between the average beauty rating of politicians on the right and the left, expressed as a percentage share of the standard deviation of all politicians' beauty ratings. \*\*\* and \*' denote statistical significance at the 1% and 5% levels in one-sided t-tests of the null hypothesis that politicians on the right do not look better than politicians on the left. Australia: candidates for the House of Representatives, with candidates on the right belonging to the Liberal Party of Australia and the National Party and 149 candidates on the left belonging to Australian Labor Party; European Union: Members of the European Parliament, with members of the Group of the European People's Party and Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (349 MEPs) being defined as belonging to the right and members of the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats in the European Parliament and Confederal Group of the European United Left - Nordic Green Left (219 MEPs) being defined as belonging to the left; Finland: candidates in municipal and parliamentary elections, with 465 candidates on the right belonging to the National Coalition Party and 891 candidates on the left belonging to the Social Democratic Party or to the Left Alliance; United States: candidates in Senate and gubernatorial elections, with 273 candidates on the right belonging to the Republican Party and candidates on the left belonging to the Democratic Party. Respondents evaluating Australian 272 candidates were Australian; respondents evaluating MEPs were American; respondents evaluating Finnish candidates were all non-Finns; and respondents evaluating American candidates were predominantly European.

look better than politicians on the left not only in Finland, but also in the European Parliament, Australia and the Unites States, providing strong support for our hypothesis that conservative parties have better-looking candidates. Table 2 shows that parties on the right have a beauty advantage compared with parties on the left. The difference is smallest in the United States, with Republicans having on average 14 percant higher beauty ratings than Democrats. The beauty advantage for politicians on the right is considerably larger in Australia and Europe. Interestingly, conservative parties and parties on the left have traditionally been much wider apart than Democrats and Republicans, although the gap between Democrats and Republicans has dra-

> matically widened in the past decade. Also, European and Australian parties traditionally have a stronger party discipline than in the American politics, which goes well together with a stronger difference between politicians representing parties on the left and on the right in Australia and Europe.

> To further test whether political parties on the right have an advantage of being able to recruit their candidates from a pool of potential candidates who look better than those in the pool available to parties on the left, we used American National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Harris and Udry 2012). This survey includes interviewer evaluations of physical attractiveness and self-reported ideological position from very liberal (in the American sense of the term, i.e. left-oriented) to very conservative for 4,789 American youths. In line with our hypothesis, conservatism and beauty are positively correlated among men. These findings suggest that Republicans have had an advantage in recruiting good-looking politicians.

# BEAUTY AS A CUE FOR IDEOLOGY

An important test of our hypothesis that voters use beauty as a cue for ideology comes from comparing the link between beauty and perceived ideology among politicians who belong, in reality, to the same bloc. We asked our respondents to evaluate, on the basis of photographs alone, which side each of the Finnish candidates represents. Table 3 shows that regardless of the true party of the

Source: Berggren et al. (2017).

#### Table 3

Average beauty evaluations of Finnish candidates according to inferred ideolog

Beauty	Observations
2.96 (1.04)	1,658
0.0001	
2.82 (1.00)	1,401
2.67 (0.98)	2,218
0.0006	
2.58 (0.96)	3,080
	2.96 (1.04) 0.0001 2.82 (1.00) 2.67 (0.98) 0.0006

Notes: Standard deviations are in parentheses. Candidates on the right belong to the National Coalition Party. Candidates on the left belong to the Social Democratic Party or to the Left Alliance. One observation is one assessment of one candidate by one respondent. P-values are from one-sided t-tests of the null hypothesis that candidates on the right do not look better than candidates on the left. Respondents were all non-Finns.

Source: Berggren et al. (2015).

candidates, the average beauty of candidates classified as being on the right exceeds that of candidates classified as being on the left.

We also showed respondents photographs of either MEPs or US candidates and asked them to indicate on a scale from 1 to 10 where they expected each politician to be located on a left-right scale ranging from 1 (farthest to the left) to 10 (farthest to the right). These results, reported in detail in Berggren et al. (2017), showed that MEPs representing party blocs that we classify as left were placed to the left of MEPs representing party blocs that we classify as right. Correspondingly, Democrats were placed to the left of Republicans. We also regressed the politicians' inferred ideology on beauty evaluations from another pool of respondents, controlling for the gender and age of the politicians. It turned out that beautiful politicians, both in Europe and the United States, are placed farther to the right.

# **BEAUTY AND ELECTORAL SUCCESS**

Let me now turn to the consequences of beauty for candidates in Finnish elections, competing against other candidates in the same party. Finland has a proportional electoral system in both municipal and parliamentary elections. Each voter has to vote for one candidate on a party list, which creates within-party competition among a large number of candidates. Seats are allocated using the D'Hondt method, in which the number of seats to each party list depends on the number of votes that all candidates on that list got together, relative to the number of votes that all other party lists got together. Within each party list, the seats are allocated in the order determined by the number of personal votes that the candidate got. Within-party competition in a proportional system allows us to study whether beauty matters more for candidates on the left or for candidates on the right.

Berggren *et al.* (2010 and 2017) measure a candidate's electoral success in Finland by the number of votes for that candidate, relative to the average number of votes for all candidates on the same list. Formally, denote the number of personal votes for candidate *i* on list *j* by  $p_i$ , and by  $v_i$  the sum of personal votes for all candidates on list *j*, divided by number of candidates on list *j*. The relative success for candidate *i* on list *j* is given by:

(1) Relative success<sub>*i*,*j*</sub> = 
$$\left(\frac{p_i}{v_j}\right) * 100$$
.

/ \

An increase in the relative success by x means that the candidate's number of votes increased by x percent, relative to the average number of votes for all candidates on the same list. This measure controls for differences in party popularity, in district sizes and in the number of candidates that a party has in a district. Therefore, it can be

used for all parties and in all districts, independently of differences in size or party popularity.

Municipal elections can be characterized as low-information elections as only a few candidates are 'career politicians' with a history of active campaigning and public visibility. The parliamentary election, instead, can be characterized as high-information election. Many parliamentary candidates have been active in municipal politics, and being a member of parliament is a full-time job. Also, campaigning is much more intense and features frequent media appearances.

Table 4 shows the regression results. The unreported dummies are *Young*, which denotes an age under 30, and *Old*, which denotes an age over 60, together with dummies for education. For both the municipal and the parliamentary elections, we report three specifications that differ in controls for education and in whether we interact the variables with unreported coefficients (age and education) with *Right*.

In line with our theory, Table 4 shows that the beauty premium on the right is about twice as big as the beauty premium on the left in low-information municipal elections, but about the same in parliamentary high-information elections. This result is robust to adding various controls. Importantly, we also find that there is a positive beauty premium on the left in municipal elections, suggesting that the general valuation of beauty has a stronger effect than its use as a cue for ideology. In municipal elections, a beauty increase of one standard deviation attracts about 8–9 percent more votes for the average non-incumbent candidate on the left, and 19–22 percent more votes for the average non-incumbent candidate on the right.

### **EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE**

Does the higher beauty premium on the right reflect a causal mechanism, in line with what our theory suggests? To test this, we carried out an experimental election. We used 100 randomly selected photographs of candidates on the left from the Finnish elections and matched them with 100 photographs of candidates on the right. The matching was random subject to the constraints that the candidates should be of the same gen-

# Table 4 Beauty premia of non-incumbent candidates in real elections

	Municipal	Municipal	Municipal	Parliamentary	Parliamentary	Parliamentary
	Non-incumbents	Non-incumbents	Non-incumbents	Non-incumbents	Non-incumbents	Non-incumbents
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Beauty	9.14***	8.36***	8.40**	15.92***	15.55***	13.50***
	(2.57)	(2.43)	(2.54)	(3.76)	(3.73)	(3.88)
Beauty × Right	9.76**	13.44***	11.22***	1.57	2.47	4.93
	(3.39)	(2.46)	(2.59)	(7.20)	(7.29)	(7.50)
Male dummy	- 20.05	- 19.06	- 18.13	5.01	5.41	6.79
	(10.95)	(10.95)	(9.94)	(6.12)	(6.24)	(5.35)
Male dummy × Right	25.00	26.88	21.32	2.22	1.55	0.93
	(19.53)	(19.13)	(21.39)	(12.47)	(12.67)	(11.61)
Age dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Education dummies	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Unreported dummies interacted with Right	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
List fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Number of candidates	686	686	686	489	489	489
R-squared	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.06	0.06	0.07

Notes: The dependent variable is Relative success in the Finnish 2004 municipal and 2003 parliamentary election. Non-incumbent candidates do not serve in the office to which they are candidates. Candidates on the right belong to the National Coalition Party. Candidates on the left belong to the Social Democratic Party or to the Left Alliance. The education dummies are Comprehensive school or less (at most 10 years of schooling); Upper-secondary education (corresponds to 12 years of schooling); Vocational education (10–12 years of schooling); and University education (with a degree). Robust standard errors clustered at the list level are in parentheses. \*\*\* and \*\* denote statistical significance at the 1% and 5% levels. Respondents were all non-Finns.

Source: Berggren *et al.* (2017).

#### Table 5

#### Electoral success for candidates on the right in an experimental election

Respondent category:	Left	Right
Share of races won by candidate on the right	0.60**	0.72***
Average vote share of candidate on the right	0.57***	0.66***

Notes: A voter-respondent is on the right (left) if the answer to a question about whether redistribution in his or her country should be increased was 'somewhat against' or 'strongly against' ('somewhat in favor' or 'strongly in favor'). \*\*\* and \*\* denote statistical significance at the 1% and 5% level. For the average vote share the significance levels refer to p-values from one-sided t-tests of the null hypothesis that the vote share does not exceed 0.5. For the share of races won by the candidate on the right the significance levels refer to p-values from one-sided binomial tests of the null hypothesis that the probability of the right candidate winning is not larger than 0.5 in each pairwise election. Number of respondents on the right (left): 15 (21). Respondents were all non-Finns.

Source: Berggren et al. (2017).

#### Table 6

#### Beauty in an experimental election

	(1)	(2)
	Vote for the	Vote for the first
	first candidate	candidate
Beauty gap between the first and second	0.22***	0.19***
candidate	(0.01)	(0.01)
Right respondent × Beauty gap		0.06***
		(0.02)
Right respondent		- 0.002
		(0.02)
Constant	0.49***	0.49***
	(0.01)	(0.01)
R-squared	0.14	0.14
Observations	2,668	2,668

Notes: The first (second) candidate refers to the candidate whose photograph was placed to the left (right) on the survey page. The dependent variable is a dummy=1 for voting for the candidate placed first. The beauty gap is the average beauty score of the first candidate minus the average beauty score of the second candidate. Robust standard errors are in parentheses. \*\*\* denotes statistical significance at the 1% level. According to F-tests, neither of the constants differs from 0.5 at the 10% significance level. The sample includes respondents who are either classified as being ideologically on the left or on the right. "Abstain from voting" responses are excluded. Respondents were all non-Finns.

Source: Berggren et al. (2017).

der, of similar age and from the same type of election (municipal or parliamentary). The parts were shown to 41 respondents living outside of Finland who were asked in each pair, which person they would vote for, or if they would rather abstain if having to choose between voting for one of the persons based on the photographs alone, or abstaining.

We found that candidates on the right looked better in 61 of the 100 randomly matched pairs. Table 5 shows that the candidates on the right are also the more successful in this experimental election. This holds independently of the respondents' own ideology, measured by their answer to the question of whether they support a suggestion to increase redistribution in their country of residence. As shown in Table 5, candidates on the right von 60 percent of the races in experimental elections among respondents on the left, and 72 percent of the races among respondents on the right. As for the vote share difference, candidates on the right collected 57 percent of voters from respondents on the left and 66 percent of votes from respondents on the right. So with both measures, the beauty premium is larger among respondents on the right, in line with our theory.

We also tested whether respondents on the right react more strongly to beauty differences. Table 6 shows that they do. In it, we present regression results that show the probability of voting for the candidate whose photograph happened to be placed first. The first column shows that the candidate vote shares respond strongly to the beauty gaps. The second column shows that this holds for both respondents who are themselves on the left and for respondents who are themselves on the right, but that the difference is larger for respondents on the right.

# CONCLUSION

To sum up, Berggren et al. (2017) show that politicians on the right are more beautiful than politicians on the left in Europe, the United States and Australia, that voters use beauty as a cue for candidate ideology, and that non-incumbent candidates on the right benefit more from beauty in low-information elections. Together with the previously established finding that good-looking candidates are more likely to win elections (see Todorov et al. 2005; Berggren et al. 2010), this implies that political parties on the right are bound to benefit from the role of beauty in politics. Since elections are often decided by a close margin, beauty can have major economic consequences by favoring the preferred policies of the right in terms of taxation, income transfers and public goods provision over the often quite different preferred policies of the left.

Our analysis is positive, but a lot of debate surrounding our findings and media requests relate to normative aspects. Is it a problem that voters reward beauty? Are voters mistaken when doing so? Our take is that voters have the right to decide whom to vote for, and at a fundamental level it would be inappropriate for researchers to tell people to discard a criterion that they have chosen to use. Yet, research on various behavioral biases can help people to overcome those. So, we hope that voters would spend a moment pondering about their susceptibility to appearances (as well as to easy rhetoric), and whether this may lead them to overlook more important criteria when making their choices. The finding that candidate appearance plays the biggest role among uninformed voters also suggests a way forward to those citizens worried about other people being persuaded by appearances. Making voters more informed would reduce the role of appearances, in addition to, hopefully, resulting also more directly in better policies. When alternative facts and other smoke and mirrors threaten to undermine even established democracies, the case for promoting informed debate based on facts, rather than alternatives to facts, goes well beyond its effects on the role of beauty in politics.

#### **FURTHER READING**

Berggren *et al.* (2017) generated wide media coverage, ranging to short mentions to analytical articles and can be read here (open access): http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0047272716302201.

The following is link to an article in The Atlantic: https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/01/conservatives-liberals-trump/512987/

The following is link to an article in Washington Post: https://www. washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/01/10/ conservatives-really-are-better-looking-research-says/

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