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ESSAY

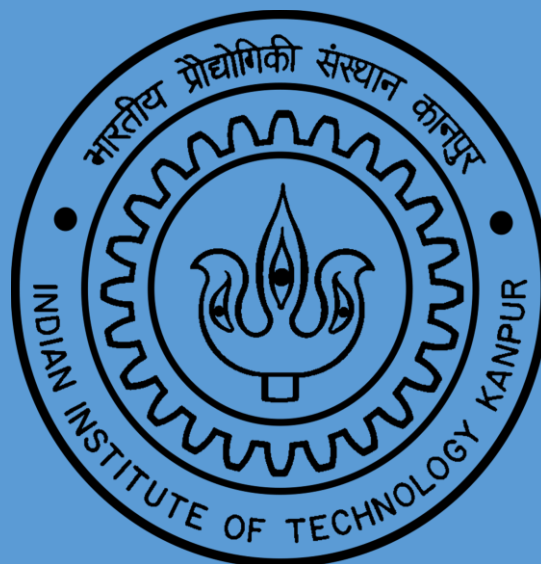
ARE WE RATIONAL VOTERS?: A STUDY OF “HALO-EFFECTS”

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1. INTRODUCTION

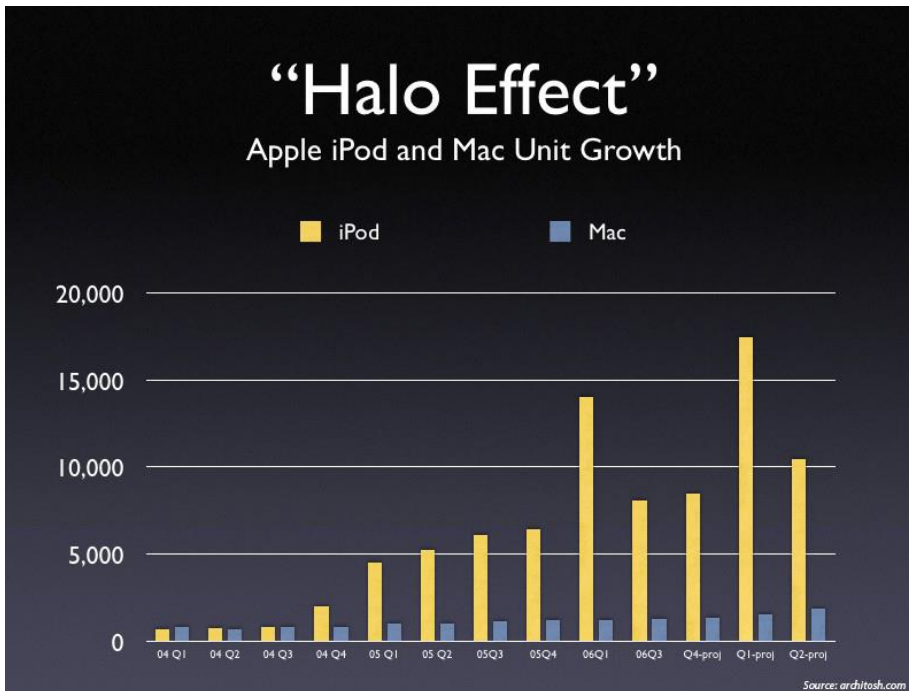
The “halo effect”, a coin termed by the great psychologist Edward Thorndike, is a cognitive bias in which an observer’s overall impression of a person, company or brand influences the observer’s feelings and thoughts about that entity’s character or properties. It is basically a type of confirmation bias, where positive feelings in one area cause ambiguous or neutral traits to be viewed positively¹. The first effect was documented in the U.S. Army decades ago, when soldiers who earned high scores from their commanders for one quality (say neatness) were rated highly for entirely unrelated qualities (such as loyalty and physical strength) too². Though the term was originally coined referring only to people (as being perceived having a halo); however, its use has been greatly expanded in various fields like that of brand marketing, judicial and educational systems. The term is usually used to describe positive effects, i.e. if a person likes one aspect of something, then he will be susceptible to have a positive view towards everything about it. But often the halo effect works in negative direction too. It is then referred to as the “horns effect” or the “devil’s effect” or more generally “reverse halo effect.”

A person’s attractiveness has also been found to produce a halo effect in a sense that perceptions of attractiveness may affect judgements related to personality traits. As revealed by recent research, perceptions tied to life success and personality (trustworthiness and friendliness) can be greatly affected by a person’s attractiveness. Today, various phenomena in varied fields ranging from marketing, academics and advertising to politics and judicial systems have been explained using halo effects. No wonder advertisers pay heroic actors and beautiful actresses to promote products about which they have absolutely no expertise. Coming to more specific and famous examples, one can refer to the article by Jason Zweig - *The Halo Effect: How It Polishes Apple's and Buffett's Image* that appeared in The Wall Street Journal in August 2011. He argued that the aura of cool that Steve Jobs personality and his visionary image had cast over Apple’s Products has turned customers into religious believers. And indeed, Apple has been a classic example of the halo effect. When the iPod was released in 2001, there was a speculation in the market that the sales of Apple’s Mac laptop would increase because of the iPod’s success. Customers who had a great experience with the iPod would buy a Mac computer simply because it is also made by Apple Inc. The figure below shows the speculated trend to be true. Likewise, Zweig stated that Warren Buffett’s reputation for probity and his unrivalled investing record can cast a warm glow over the stocks he buys. In August 2011, when Bank of America announced a \$5 billion investment from Berkshire Hathaway – Buffett’s company, it not only sent up BOA’s stock up by \$18 billion at its high for the day but also added billions more

¹ Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halo_effect last modified on 28 March, 2015.

² Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halo_effect last modified on 28 March, 2015.

to the market value of the shares of other banks like Citigroup and Wells Fargo (also a Buffett holding).³



In the midst of 2008 financial crisis, Goldman Sachs Group also got a similar kind of boost from Buffett’s investment.

The study of halo effect has not just been limited to markets and branding. Previous studies have tried to examine the impacts of attractiveness and familiarity on voting behaviour and have

revealed that they are strong predictors of decisions regarding who is put in a position of leadership. In an article named “To understand American politics, understand the halo effect”⁴ published in February 2012, attorney Erich Vieth argued that politicians do all kinds of things to show that they are capable and likeable rather than to show how well-informed they are to lead a country. In their efforts to get elected, politicians rely heavily on the “halo effect.” Quoting the famous psychologist and Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences (2002), Daniel Kahneman, from his book “Thinking, Fast and Slow” – *“If you like the president’s politics, you probably like his voice and his appearance as well. The tendency to like (or dislike) everything about a person—including things you have not observed—is known as the halo effect. The term has been in use in psychology for century, but it has not come into wide use in everyday language. This is a pity, because the halo effect is a good name for a common bias that plays a large role in shaping our view of people and situations. It is one of the ways the representation of the world that system one generates is simpler and more coherent than the real thing.”*

Thus it is quite evident that halo effect plays a strong role in the world of politics. Actors and sportsmen turned politicians contesting and winning elections just on the basis of their popularity and fan-following that they earned in their respective fields is common all throughout the globe. This

³ Source: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424053111904009304576532861636564194> published on August 27, 2011

⁴ Source: <http://dangerousintersection.org/2012/02/28/to-understand-american-politics-understand-the-halo-effect/> published on February 28, 2012

raises a few intriguing questions – Are we rational when we vote? Do we take into account the political background and expertise of the candidate we vote for? How do political parties exploit this bias and irrational behaviour of the voters? This essay aims to get an insight into these topics by looking at the previous literature and by applying the four heuristics of behavioural economics – (1) Where have we seen this problem before?; (2) Which groups are involved?; (3) Who benefits from what?; and (4) Who faces which powers? - Into the context of this issue.

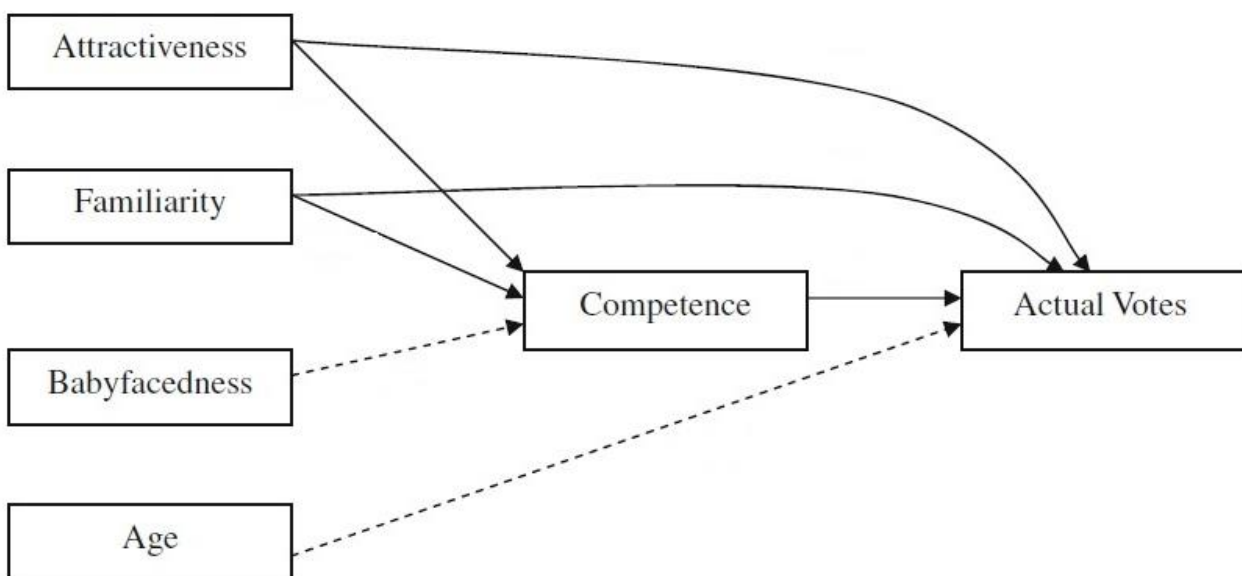
2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HISTORICAL ANALOGIES

Previous research demonstrated that inferences of competence from the face are good predictors of election outcomes (Todorov, Mandisova, Gore, & Hall (2005)). They showed that inferences of competence based solely on facial appearance predicted the outcomes of U.S. congressional elections better than chance and were also related linearly to the margin of victory. From a voter's subjective perspective, voting decisions are not justified in terms of candidate's looks but on the candidate's position on issues important to the voter, and from an ideological perspective, party affiliation should sway any impressions from the face. But from a psychological perspective, rapid automatic inferences from the facial appearances of the political candidates can influence the processing of subsequent information about them. In his book "Thinking, Fast and Slow", Kahneman talks about a two-system model of decision making. System-I involves in fast, intuitive, unreflective and effortless decision making whereas System-II processes the information in a slow, deliberate and effortful manner. Todorov et al. argue that many inferences about other people, including inferences from facial appearance, can be characterized as System-I processes and can have subtle and often subjectively unrecognized effects on subsequent deliberate judgements. They also asked the participant to make judgements on seven different trait dimensions: competence, intelligence, leadership, honesty, trustworthiness, charisma and likability. From a simple halo-effect perspective, the participant should've evaluated the candidates in the same manner across these traits. But their findings revealed that the trait judgements were highly differentiated and these judgements had selective effects on decisions, thus ruling out the role of halo-effects in voting behaviour.

Extensive research in the last decades has also identified warmth, besides competence, as a core dimension underlying person and group perception (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick & Xu (2002)). Warmth is defined as the aptitude to carry out harmonious social relations and signals that the perceived target can be profitably approached. Competence, in contrast, is related to the possession of skills that enable to achieve one's goals. (Funk (1996)) evaluated political candidates on two dimensions, namely warmth and competence. (Kinder & Sears (1985)) considered the factor of moral integrity also.

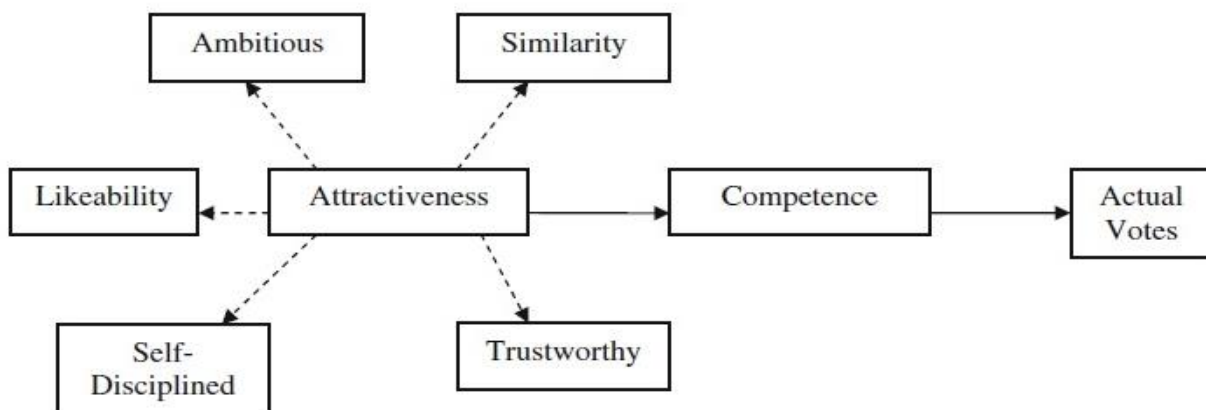
(Castelli, Carraro, Ghitti & Pastore (2009)) examined the role of warmth and competence on electoral success. They found that though people considered both competence and sociability, as inferred from the face, as related to higher chances of winning the elections, a different pattern emerged in relation to the actual electoral outcomes. Perceived competence was found to be related to higher chances of winning, whereas perceived sociability was negatively related to electoral success. Consistent with the results of Todorov et al. (2005), even they demonstrated that electoral results cannot be accounted in terms of halo effects, and that the effects remained significant even after controlling for other positive judgemental dimensions, such as pleasantness, attractiveness and honesty.

Continuing on the foundation of the work of Todorov et al., (Verhulst, Lodge & Lavine (2010)) considered whether judgements of competence function as rationalizations that occur earlier in the stream of information processing by focusing on how people arrive at competence judgements in the first place. They suggest that competence ratings are partly rationalizations of other preconscious judgements: namely familiarity and attractiveness. They assert that preconscious familiarity activates positive feelings that are subsequently used to construct evaluative judgements including the ones related to competence. Independently, preconscious judgements of attractiveness are also mediated by assessments of competence. Based on the proven fact that people implicitly believe that what is beautiful is good, the judgements of attractiveness create an inferential halo around the political candidates which further prompt subsequent trait judgements about them. The following two figures better explain the findings of this study.



Path analysis showing competence mediates the effects of attractiveness and familiarity on actual votes. Solid lines show mediated paths while dashed lines show significant unmediated paths. Italicized coefficients show the remaining direct effects

Source: Verhulst, Brad, Milton Lodge, and Howard Lavine. "The attractiveness halo: Why some candidates are perceived more favorably than others." *Journal of nonverbal behavior* 34, no. 2 (2010): 111-117.



The halo effect around attractiveness and the causal path from attractiveness, through competence judgments to the actual vote shares

Sources: Verhulst, Brad, Milton Lodge, and Howard Lavins. "The attractiveness halo: Why some candidates are perceived more favorably than others." Journal of nonverbal behavior 34, no. 2 (2010): 111-117.

In fact, a study (Palmer & Peterson 2012) found that even when we take factual knowledge into account, we still perceive more attractive candidates as more knowledgeable also. Another study (Chiao, Bowman & Gill (2008)) revealed an existing gender bias in the intuitive heuristics used by the voters while evaluating candidates and deciding who to vote for. The faces of male politicians are perceived to be competent and dominant relative to their female counterparts. On the other hand, female politicians are perceived as more attractive and approachable. Combining this result with the findings of Todorov et al. it can be understood why there is male dominance in the political world. But this difference can also be accounted to the cultural stereotypes.

Thus it can be seen that there is a very rich literature that focuses on the voting behaviour of people based on the inferences of in the following sections, we'll apply the four heuristics to study the problem in more detail.

3. HEURISTIC 1: WHERE HAVE WE SEEN THIS PROBLEM BEFORE?

The existence of halo effects and its impact on electoral outcomes can be seen across time and cultures. It is an excellent depiction of how our decisions are not completely rational and how biases and preferences play a huge impact on decision making. Halo effects in consumer behaviour is one of the classic examples of the violation of the basic assumption of classical economics that all consumers are rational and they are only interested in utility maximization. But what we really see is how our consumption patterns and behaviours are largely determined by factors like brand loyalty or

even by who is endorsing the product. And whether we realise it or not, people of all age groups, sex, cultures and countries tend to have these irrationalities in their decision making.

Returning back to the arena of politics, the voting behaviour observed is analogous to the consumer behaviour discussed above. We generally tend to go by the image of the electoral candidate to draw inferences about his/her capabilities. No wonder that the young and handsome Rahul Gandhi, educated at Harvard and Cambridge and coming from the lineage of the famous Nehru family automatically became the face of the young India when he joined Indian politics. He didn't have many political credentials to his name, but still, in him people saw the image of the transforming India, the changing of order from the old to new and what not. And Congress exploited this fanfare to their full benefit in the 2009 Lok Sabha elections. Though it cannot be denied that there are a lot of factors involved in the political front of a country as diverse and complex as India, but one cannot neglect the impact that Rahul Gandhi fanfare had on how people voted.

Dharmendra and Amitabh Bachchan, both actors and rather well acclaimed ones, but with almost no political credentials contested elections at some point in their lives. Amitabh Bachchan contested Allahabad's seat of the eighth Lok Sabha elections in 1984 against the former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, H.N. Bahuguna. He won by one of the highest margins in the history of general elections⁵. That a film-star had higher political experience and expertise than a former chief minister is something that can be argued against. Still the fact that the people voted for a young, attractive, vibrant film-star over an experienced politician goes on to show how halo effects influence our voting behaviour. Dharmendra's case is no different. He was elected as a Member of the Parliament in the 2004 general elections from Bikaner, Rajasthan on Bhartiya Janta Party's ticket⁶. He rarely attended the parliament during when the house was in session and rather preferred to shoot for movies. It is highly improbable that a party as big as BJP did not have a local, more deserving candidate to contest for the seat. But the fact that they gave the ticket to Dharmendra shows that even the political parties understand the public's mentality and tend to exploit it to turn the wheels of fortune in their favour.

4. HEURISTIC 2: WHAT POWER GROUPS ARE INVOLVED?

Following are the groups involved

- The voters.
- The political parties.

⁵ Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amitabh_Bachchan last modified on 9 March, 2015.

⁶ Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dharmendra> last modified on 31 March, 2015.

- The candidates contesting the election.

Though one can argue that the candidates are a part of the political parties and hence should not be treated as a separate group, we can assume that even the candidates have to convince the party leadership and other members to be given the ticket to contest the election. Also, apart from the benefits for the political party that comes to power, we assume that there are other personal benefits that the candidate reaps. It is pretty clear that each group has its own predictable material goals and opinions on this issue. Another assumption that we make is that the voters take decisions that are not completely rational. This is valid because halo-effects can be studied only under the context of a psychological bias. Thus one has to allow for irrationality in decision making. Thus we can assume that the voters derive some positive utility if their preferred candidate wins, which consists of not just material gains but also of a non-material utility, which can be accounted for in the terms of happiness that a voter gets if the candidate he voted for wins.

As discussed before, people derive inferences about the candidates' competence from their faces. Voters tend to associate some kind of positivity with the candidates whom they perceive to be attractive, familiar and competent. As research on halo-effect reveals, people tend to associate more attractive people with the capability to take better decisions. Thus voting for a candidate perceived to be more attractive might give a feeling of voting for the right person to the voter.

It can also be noticed that the candidates are the first movers in this issue. They have to convince their respective party members to let them contest on the party's behalf. Then, it is up to the parties to decide which candidate to put up as the face of the party. They have to convince the voters that their candidate is the best through campaigning. The candidates themselves, through rallies and speeches, try to convince the voters about their capabilities, not just through their political expertise, experience and manifestos, but also through other means. These involve wearing clothes like their target groups to show the voters that they are a part of their group, or attending charity events prior to elections to create an image of an altruistic person. But finally, the power rests in the hands of the voters, as they are the ones to decide who to vote for. Naturally, the candidate getting a majority of the votes wins the election.

5. HEURISTIC 3: WHO BENEFITS FROM WHAT? (*Cui Bono*)

The beneficiaries in this case are the political party that comes to power and obviously the winning candidate too. The party that comes to power can run the state/country for the next term. It gains the majority in the parliament, with which comes the power to make and amend laws, bring about reforms and run the whole state/country. The candidate who is elected, basically the face of the winning party,

becomes the official head of the state/country – be it the Chief Minister of a state or the Prime Minister/President of the country. Alongwith the post come a lot of powers, fame, benefits and facilities associated with it. Thus it is clear that the aim of every contestant would be to win and reap the benefits of the power thus attained. As studies in psychology and behavioural economics show, the greed for power is something that lies in every human being. Everyone likes to hold and exercise power to his/her benefit. On the other hand, the losing party and candidate would be at a loss since they'd have invested a lot of money into the election campaigning and losing the elections leaves them as a minority in the parliament. Thus they have little or no power, depending on the margin with which they lost.

Arguing along the lines of previous studies on halo effects, it is beneficial for the parties to come up with a candidate who looks attractive and competent from the face. This increases their chance of winning in the elections. It doesn't mean that they should totally neglect their political ideologies and manifestos, but coming up with a candidate who seems likable, competent and trustworthy to the citizens won't hurt them. Since earlier studies have shown that inference of competence from the face predicts election outcomes quite effectively, the candidates benefit if they can give the impression of being trustworthy and competent to the voters. Investing more time and effort to create an image of a likable, ambitious and competent person would certainly be a plus from the candidate's and the party's point of view.

The citizens or the voters, on the other hand, benefit if the candidate they vote for comes to power. It would definitely mean they believe that their preferential party would bring about reforms and build policies that would be beneficial to them. Also, they'd feel happy because they voted for a person whom they perceived to be competent and that would automatically give them a sense of security and positive feeling that the elected candidate would perform his/her duties properly.

6. HEURISTIC 4: WHO HAS WHAT POWERS?

The fourth and the final heuristic focuses on which group exercises what powers. It can be clearly seen that the most powerful players involved here are the voters. All the political parties and candidates face this power of the voters. Plainly speaking, it is the citizens, who by the virtue of their votes, decide whether or not to vote for a certain candidate. Thus it means that the citizens are the ones who are to be pleased and convinced by the political parties. Thus the citizens have the power to choose their favoured candidate from the lot. The parties themselves have to decide which candidate to give the ticket to. Thus we can say that the political parties have the power of choosing an appropriate candidate. Thus the candidate has to convince the other party members about his/her

competence and that he/she is capable of winning enough votes for the party. Let us suppose, for simplicity, that there are two candidates – one who is high on political expertise and experience but not perceivable as competent and attractive according to the “normal social conventions”. The other candidate is low on expertise but more attractive, familiar and competent as judged from his/her face. Now a party has the power to decide as to who will be the more appropriate candidate for elections. As findings from studies on halo-effects suggest, even though a lot of deliberate thinking goes into the voting decisions of the people, this deliberate thinking is driven by the initial impression of the candidates. Thus the political parties face a kind of trade-off between choosing between the candidates. So one can argue that ideologies within the political parties may differ and hence, the members of the parties may themselves be divided on which candidate to choose. Thus the members within a political party also, in some way, face the powers of others within the same party only to a limited degree, as there might be competition within the party. Thus a candidate competes with another candidate within the same party to be the prospective face of the party. Despite this competition, they are cohesive in the sense that if their party wins, there are certain benefits that all the members would reap.

Every political party competes with other political parties too. This means that once they have resolved the internal competition and chosen their electoral candidate, he/she competes with the candidates of other parties in trying to convince the public about how he/she is the best candidate. Based solely on halo-effects, we can say that a candidate who is more attractive and looks more competent has a higher power of turning the odds in his/her favour, as he/she has the power of creating a better appeal on the voters’ minds and “influence” their decisions in his/her favour. As discussed in the previous paragraph, the final and the major power rests with the public as they vote and decide who wins the election.

7. SYNTHESIS OF THE FOUR STEPS

Studying the voting behaviour of citizens is an issue of utmost importance. The whole economy, development and policies of a region depend on the kind of government that comes into power. The kind of leadership that people choose for themselves determines how their state/country is governed. Hence it is important to see the factors that citizens take into account when they vote and how intuitive and how deliberative is this decision making process of theirs. As discussed above, “halo-effects” of a political candidate go a long way in determining what are his/her chances of getting elected. Hence it is anything but natural that the political groups target this inefficiency in human decision making. As we saw in the numerous examples discussed above, political groups have exploited the citizens

over time by promising them with candidates they know well, worship and believe in but not living up to those promises in the end. Hence studying the impact of halo-effects on voting decisions is something that is not just an exercise carried out for fun. It has immense social, political and economic significance. Being able to understand our biases and psychological limitations can help us to deliberately try to be more informed, careful and calculative rather than intuitive in our decision making. For example, if citizens are told about the halo-effects and how they affect their voting behaviour, without them even realizing it at a conscious level, they can try to make an effort to not judge the political candidates just on the basis of a first impression. They can try to be more careful, thoughtful while judging the candidates, which will enable them to take decisions that are more rational. They have to understand that they constitute a powerful group, understand better the kinds of powers that rest in their hands and how their vote has an immeasurable impact. Obviously, such psychological biases are something that are not totally within our control but with some calculated efforts, we can try to minimize the negative effects of such biases.

Having said that, it doesn't mean that such biases only have a negative impact. As Kahneman discusses in his book, such intuitions are developed over time due to our experiences. They have survived evolution and developed in us because most of the times, they make the decision making faster and more effective. Though we cannot control our System-I and its decision making, we can hone our System-II to keep the former system in check and try to make more involved and calculated decisions.

Coming back to the heuristics and decision making, facing it from the political parties' perspective, an information about the way people think and take decisions can help them to understand the demands of the public and choose their candidates wisely. What really happens vastly depends on how well the candidates and the political parties are able to convince people that they are most capable to cater to the needs of the public. But yet, a little knowledge of what might help in turning the tables in their favour can be of immense importance for the parties and candidates alike.

8. CONCLUSION

This essay has tried to study the impacts of "halo-effects" on the voting decisions of the people and how political parties tend to exploit this irrationality in human behaviour to their benefit. Starting with the history of halo effects, we discussed how this psychological bias has been observed in decision making in different fields. Various studies related to inference of competence based on exposure to faces of political candidates for a short interval of time and the resulting electoral outcomes were discussed. All the studies found a positive relation between the perceived competence

and the electoral outcomes. Other studies emphasized that inferences of competence are based on factors like attractiveness, familiarity, baby-facedness and likability of the candidates' faces and these factors breed positivity in the minds of the voters. Then using the four-step heuristic for reading dynamic social situations, we studied the same issue of voting behaviour and how it is influenced by halo effects. Various examples were taken into account from real life political instances, where factors like fan-following, hero-worship, attractiveness and familiarity influenced the electoral outcomes, not just in terms of victory but also in terms of the margin of victory. This gave an empirical evidence to the theory discussed in the previous sections. Also, we tried to study qualitatively, what are the trade-offs that political parties face and what are the steps they can try to take in order to benefit from the voting behaviour of the citizens. We also discussed about the different groups involved in this situation, and the powers and benefits of each one of them. Finally we saw the socio-economic impacts of halo-effects and how informing the citizens about these psychological biases can actually help them in making more informed and better voting decisions. Also, we saw how halo effects can be useful for political parties in choosing their candidates wisely.

In the end, it needs to be understood that voting and politics and decision making in these fields is a very complex process that cannot be brought down to be affected by just a couple of factors. Though it is a very complex and deliberative decision making process, one cannot deny that halo-effects have a role to play in influencing the voting behaviour. Knowing about them can prove to be beneficial for both the voters and the candidates and might go a long way in improving the social welfare in general.

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