


Alexander Todorov, *Face Value: The Irresistible Influence of First Impressions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press). 336 pages. ISBN: 9781400885725. Hardcover \$32.95.

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In *Face Value*, Alexander Todorov provides scientific insights regarding a very intuitive and irresistible human inclination: the formation of first impressions. With only a single split-second glance at someone's face, people unconsciously form judgments about someone's character. According to Todorov, these judgments have significant consequences in our everyday lives. For example, politicians who look more competent are more likely to get elected. *Face Value* provides an overview of research into the consequences, origins, and accuracy of first impressions from the face.

The book begins with the history of face research, or physiognomy ("discovering the interior man by the exterior appearance"). The book is structured in four parts. In the first three parts, Todorov provides insights into three fundamental questions: (1) "What are the consequences of first impressions?," (2) "How are first impressions formed?," and (3) "Are first impressions accurate?" The fourth part of the book digs deeper into the evolutionary basis of these first impressions. In this final part, Todorov explains that humans are born with a natural tendency to pay attention to faces and that specialized parts of the brain are dedicated to processing facial information. His overall conclusion is that faces have a special status in human perception, particularly compared with other parts of the body.

In what follows, I will discuss three key themes from Todorov's book, starting with the consequences of first impressions. Todorov's early work (Todorov et al., 2005) into faces shows that impressions of the competence of political candidates can predict electoral outcomes. In an experiment in the United States, Todorov presented participants with two pictures of real politicians whose identities were unknown to them. These participants were then asked, "Who looks more competent?" These competence judgments predicted 70% of the election outcomes. Todorov and colleagues replicated this finding in different countries, with people of

different ages, and while controlling for different alternative explanations (Chapter 3, p. 53).

However, do these findings hold in the real world? One can imagine that for most people, political affiliation is more important than looks. Most interestingly, Todorov brings forward later studies that demonstrate that the appearance of politicians especially affects those who are less politically sophisticated and those with high media consumption—in Todorov's words, the "politically ignorant couch potatoes" (p. 54). Based on this relationship, Todorov argues that first impressions are used as shortcuts, especially for those for whom other information is unavailable or ambiguous.

Besides politics, the book provides examples of the influence of first impressions in other domains: trustworthy-looking people get more loans, firms are more likely to hire attractive CEOs, and impressions of trustworthiness and dominance can affect whether someone is found guilty in court. Overall, Todorov suggests that these impressions influence our everyday lives because they are used as heuristics and unconsciously color our judgment.

Are these (consequential) first impressions accurate? Todorov's answer is (spoiler alert) no. Many other factors can influence our impression of a person—for example, whether that person had a good night's sleep, is wearing makeup, or is expressing a certain emotion. Prior knowledge can also impact our perceptions. For example, knowing that someone committed horrible crimes strongly affects how we form our first impression from that person's face. Even though several factors influence the formation of our impressions, are these first impressions still accurate? According to the studies discussed in this part of the book, people are only slightly better than chance at judging someone's sexual orientation. For political orientation, Todorov argues that we can make more accurate judgments based on other valuable information, such as a person's gender, race, or age. "We can often do better if we completely ignore information from the face" (p. 167). Simply put: "what you see is *not* what you get" (p. 64).

If these impressions are not accurate, then what are they based on? A large part of the book discusses how experimental psychological research has developed to answer this question. Todorov demonstrates that discovering the underlying drivers of the formation of impressions is harder than it might seem. Namely, people lack introspection of their impressions of others, and a face consists of many different features, making it difficult to pinpoint the exact drivers of impressions. Todorov explains multiple experimental methods that

doi: [10.1017/pls.2020.17](https://doi.org/10.1017/pls.2020.17)

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are used to discover which facial features are responsible for which character judgments. One of these methods uses a layer of random visual noise in each picture, making certain facial features more or less visible. This method can distinguish which facial features are necessary for a certain impression to be formed. It can also be used to develop a prototypical face of a particular impression (e.g., a prototypical trustworthy or dominant face). These prototypical faces reveal that our impressions are based on our implicit biases and stereotypes.

Based on these studies, Todorov proposes that the formation of a certain judgment is not based on a specific facial feature per se, but rather the outcome of holistic processing of global properties of the face, such as femininity or masculinity, emotional expressions, and age. Each fundamental dimension of character judgments (of which there are three: attractiveness, dominance, and trustworthiness) is driven by one or a combination of these facial properties. For example, someone is perceived as more dominant when the face looks more masculine, angry, or older (the opposite is true for impressions of submissive faces). Moreover, a face is judged more trustworthy when it appears to be happy and feminine. These first impressions based on the face are thus more likely to reflect biases and stereotypes about certain personalities instead of someone's actual personality.

Although the book provides useful insights regarding the value of faces, it leaves the reader with some unanswered questions. First of all, as Todorov briefly mentions, facial expressions can influence the formation of certain judgments. However, it remains quite unclear how this plays out in real life. How much of an impact does a politician's face have once we have updated our first impression with contextual information (e.g., party affiliation)? For example, Laustsen and Petersen (2016) show in several experiments that facial features of dominance can influence a politician's success, but this effect disappears when participants are familiar with the politician. Furthermore, what happens if a politician smiles or looks angry? Could politicians strategically express certain emotions to alter the first impressions of voters and thereby the election outcome? Research in political science demonstrates that the emotional expressions of politicians can affect candidate evaluations (Gabriel & Masch, 2017; Sullivan & Masters, 1988). Moreover, according to the presented findings, politically unsophisticated people are most likely to rely on the facial appearance of politicians, but they are also least likely to vote. Taken together, it is still unclear to what extent politicians' facial appearance influences electoral outcomes.

Lastly, many contextual and cultural factors influence the formation of our first impressions, but some of these factors have not yet been taken into account fully. For example, most of the experiments that try to derive the facial properties that drive certain impressions are conducted almost exclusively in Western countries. However, the stereotypes of what it means to be competent or attractive can differ dramatically per culture and over time. For example, one of the findings of these experiments suggests that people with lighter faces are perceived as more trustworthy and less dominant, but would this be true in an African democracy, too? Furthermore, Todorov proposes that first impressions reflect our stereotypes. However, the stereotypical image of a competent leader may change over time. For example, in times of war, leaders with masculine-looking faces are preferred, whereas in times of peacemaking, people prefer the face of a feminine-looking leader (Spisak et al., 2012). Taken together, would we still pick the same politician even in different times and contexts?

These remaining questions aside, I highly recommend this book. Todorov effectively tells the story of facial research's development and gives a comprehensive overview of the literature regarding each of the fundamental questions addressed in book. The book is suitable for research in psychology, communication, and political science. For example, scholars in the field of political behavior using pictures or other visuals of politicians might benefit from the insights provided in this book. Scholars outside of face research might consider the effect that first impressions have on candidate evaluations or attitude formation, for example. Furthermore, this book is also useful for students who want to learn more about experimental research, since Todorov explains step by step how to approach certain research questions, form hypotheses, and design appropriate experiments. The book reads like a popular science book, filled with real-life examples and anecdotes, making this book also interesting and entertaining for those outside academia.

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