

Candidates' facial gestures grabbing attention in race

By CASEY LABRACK

With three months left before the 2008 presidential primaries, pundits are already scrutinizing candidates' voting records, backgrounds, and even haircuts for signs of electability. But for the head of one consumer research firm, the answers are all over the candidates' faces.

The minutia of torqued jaws, furrowed eyebrows and puffed-cheeks suggest the current Republican field is struggling to achieve the likeability of most Democratic candidates, said Dan Hill, president of Sensory Logic, a consulting firm that studies the marketability of universal facial expressions.

"I would argue there is a warmth gap, and it goes by party, and it is actually pretty substantial," Hill said.

Hill monitored the facial expressions of the major candidates as well as those of likely voters as they watched the candidates. Through hours of television coverage of the candidates and webcam video of Iowa citizens, Hill concluded that most of the '08 Republican candidates frequently display subtle anger when speaking, and fail to connect with viewers on an emotional level.

The commercials for Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., former Sen. Fred Thompson, R-Tenn., and former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani in particular, elicited few genuine emotional responses from a test group, showing "they are not using the medium effectively, really, whatsoever," said Hill.

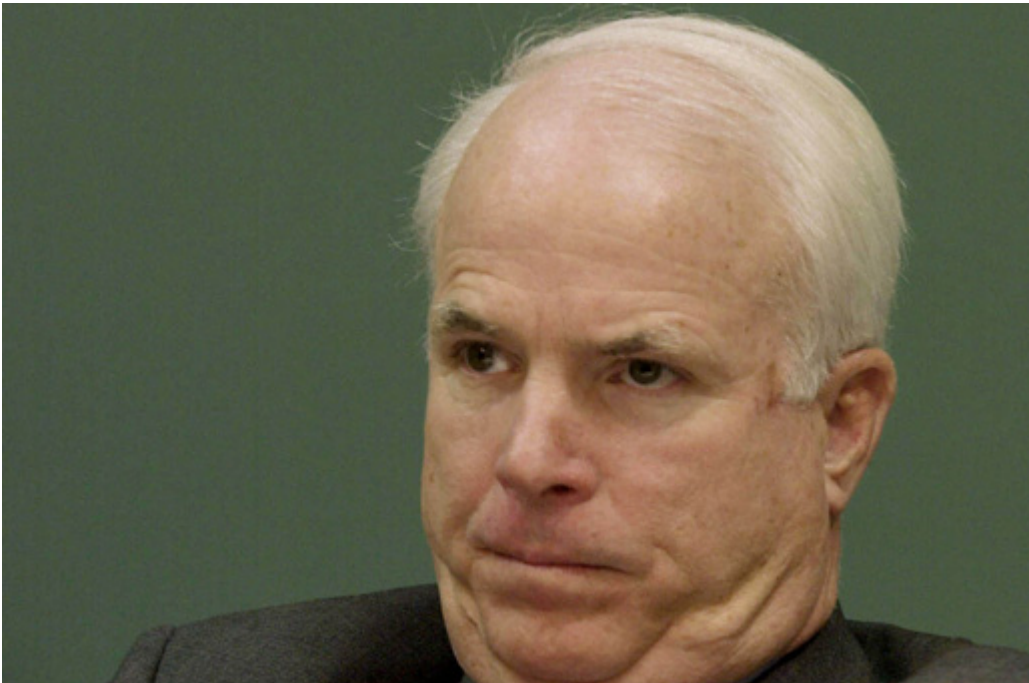


Photo by Mike Theiler, Reuters

Hill nicknamed McCain's trademark look of frustration "the puffer-fish"

As Giuliani speaks about his opponents or the campaign, his lips often curl on the left side in what Hill claims is moral revulsion. McCain's tell is a look of suppressed anger and swollen cheeks that Hill calls "the puffer-fish."

The leading Democrats more frequently seem genuinely happy and open in Hill's findings. As a result, Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., former Sen. John Edwards, D-S.C., and Gov. Bill Richardson, D-N.M., scored highest in terms of appeal in the study, according to the webcam footage of voters from the month of June.

While most independent polling use a sample size of more than 400, Hill's study covered only 57 Iowans who had voted in either the 2000 or 2004 caucuses.

Asked if he felt the sample was significant, Hill said, "Though you are used to much larger sample sizes for polls...those polls are not necessarily accurate," citing problems that polls had in predicting the 2004 election. The sample size is similar to the number used in Sensory Logic's corporate marketing research.

"I have no horse in the race," said Hill, adding that while he has been approached to work on a campaign before, he has no stake in the current election.

It was Hill's interest in politics that prompted him to apply his firm's facial decoding techniques — ordinarily used to assess commercial advertisements — to the study of the presidential race.

"All the policy papers, all the positioning, much of that goes by the wayside. It's the emotional brain that decides elections, because everybody, everybody feels before they think," said Hill. "It's actually how the brain is hard-wired."

Hill argues that voters respond best to displays of openness, confidence and happiness.

"If you look at [Ronald] Reagan versus [Walter] Mondale, look at [Bill] Clinton versus [Bob] Dole, I think it's unmistakable that the candidate who is more comfortable, more relaxed, more upbeat, smiling, more positive in their general expressions has an advantage in the campaign," said Hill. "I'm not saying it's the only factor. It is a factor, and in close elections every factor matters."

Scott Colvin, a grassroots political activist with the non-profit advocacy group American Forum, rejected the notion that voting choices were primarily subconscious decisions in which rationality plays little role. But he said there's nothing necessarily wrong about going with a gut feeling.

"Like George W. [Bush] would be a good guy to drink with? No, I don't think about that stuff," said Colvin. "Some people know all the issues but just base their votes on party affiliation. Who's to say which way is better?"

Not all the Democratic candidates fare well in voters' emotional reactions. Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y., suffers from an "ice queen" perception in the public, said Hill, because she, along with former governor Mitt Romney, R-Mass., overuses the "social," or fake, smile.

"Less than 10 percent of the public can fake the true smile," said Hill. "Woody Allen can, a few other people who are good manipulating those muscles can do so; the average person cannot."

Hill monitors the eye muscles to make his judgment.

"A true smile involves not just activity around the mouth, but around the eyes," said Hill. "The twinkle you get around the eyes is because the muscle around the eyes is relaxed and you're truly enjoying yourself."

Former Arkansas governor Michael Huckabee, whose smile passes Hill's tests, leads the struggling Republican pack in Hill's survey.

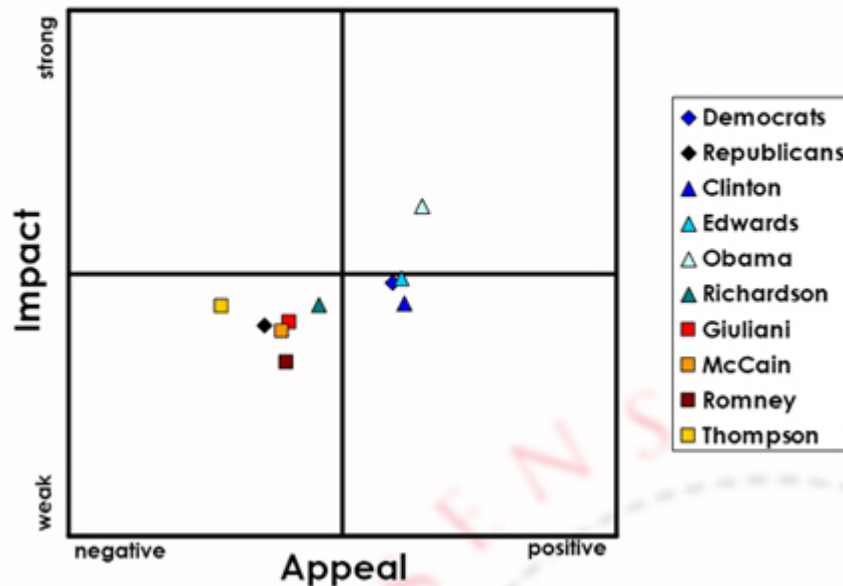
“On the Republican side...the leading person [emotionally] is actually Huckabee, who is without question the warmest of the Republican candidates,” said Hill. “I do think he is almost a natural [vice presidential] choice, and part of that would be that he could bring the conservative base with him, and bring a personality that quite frankly might offset some of the other candidates.”

Rep. Tom Tancredo, R-Colo., is “the only candidate who really frequently shows fear” on the campaign trail Hill said, although he added that most candidates show fear at least a few times during debates and other unscripted events.

Hill’s analysis, which ignores written statements and policy stances in judging a candidate’s mettle, did not impress Tancredo’s campaign.

“Lucky for us, most people vote on the issues instead of facial expressions,” said Alan Moore, press secretary for Tancredo.

Democrats vs. Republicans – Impact and Appeal



Graphic courtesy of Sensory Logic
Facial analysis of Sensory Logic’s focus groups shows the Democrats leading

American Observer reporter Lisa Chiu contributed to this story