Font Matters: Understanding Typeface Selection by Political Campaigns

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Typeface use by political campaigns is itself a form of political communication intended to convey meaning. Through interviews with graphic design practitioners and a content analysis of 908 candidate logos used in the 2018 U.S. Midterm Elections, we demonstrate that typeface selection expresses information about candidates. Interviews explore the processes by which designers choose typefaces to convey personality traits while adhering to standards of legibility and consistency. A content analysis affirms the qualitative findings, demonstrating that partisanship, competitiveness, sex, and incumbency all predict variance in typeface family selection, with significant differences more common in first names. Republicans are likelier to use serif typefaces than sans serifs relative to Democrats, particularly as race competitiveness increases. Female candidates are likelier to use script or handwriting, and males are likelier to use slab serifs. Together, our findings offer empirical evidence of contemporary practices in political typography and graphic design activities.

Keywords: Graphic design, typography, political consultants, political branding

Visuals are overlooked and under-studied in the field of political communication, despite calls (Graber, 1987) for more work in this area. However, research into this aspect of political communication has begun to flourish of late, driven in part by the rapid proliferation of digital media platforms (Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Veneti, Jackson, & Lilleker, 2019). Yet this work primarily concerns itself with photographic imagery, moving or still. Another form of visual political communication exists: graphic design. In recent years, graphic design scholarship has extended beyond campaign posters to include candidate logo designs (Billard, 2016, 2018). Our study contributes to this burgeoning area of research by offering an empirical exploration of the role of typeface selection in political candidates' logos and wordmarks.

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In focusing on typeface, or "font" to the lay reader, we consider the shapes of the letterforms themselves, rather than the words rendered by them, enabling us to consider the encoded meaning of the visual aesthetic itself. In terms of candidate logos and wordmarks, the manifest content remains the same: the candidate's name. It is the typeface in which the name is written that provides the latent content (Ahmed, 2013; Billard, 2016; Horsbøl, 2006). Here, we explore the process behind the selection of these typefaces, providing qualitative and quantitative evidence to support our argument that typefaces are chosen to convey information about candidates and differentiate them from opponents. In short, we argue that typeface selection is a form of political communication unto itself.

This work also connects the study of political communication and political branding through an understanding of how the nebulous concept of "candidate image" is formed. Since, as Westen (2007) argues, a candidate's overall political image can be described as his or her "curb appeal," arguably candidate logos represent image in its most literal sense: When voters drive by a yard sign, the feelings and impressions elicited should signify a candidate's most salient qualities (p. 294).

To explore the practice of typeface selection for campaign logos, we conduct interviews with graphic designers and perform a content analysis of 908 candidate logos from the 2018 U.S. Congressional elections. Our qualitative analysis finds that typeface selection is guided by designers' needs to convey information about the candidate and is constrained by the political context itself: The logo must be legible in formats as diverse as Web content and lapel pins and include the candidate's name, no matter how awkward the concatenation of letters. We see this process play out in our quantitative content analysis: party, incumbency, candidate sex, and race competitiveness all predict typeface selection. Together, these studies offer new insights into contemporary political typography and graphic design practices.

Visual Political Communication

Visual political communication research emphasizes the degree to which visuals influence nearly every aspect of a campaign. Photos of candidates contribute to their political image, helping voters see them as approachable and ordinary and demonstrating popularity and competency (Grabe & Bucy, 2009; Graber, 1987; Schill, 2012). Visuals can be staged by campaigns to influence how news coverage is framed or to prime perceptions of candidates or issues in the minds of voters (Domke, Perlmutter, & Spratt, 2002; Gibson & Zillmann, 2000).

Digital spaces also use visual content to cultivate a candidate's image. Beginning with campaign websites in the early 2000s, the use of visual content has differed between candidates and affected voters' perceptions of them (Verser & Wicks, 2006). As online content shifted from text-based blogs to more image-oriented social platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, the importance of visuals in politics has magnified (e.g., Farkas & Bene, 2020), to the extent that political images and infographics on social media are stronger predictors of candidate evaluations than textual content (Towner, 2017).

In addition to photographs and digital spaces, graphically designed content such as logos and print material also contribute to the development of a candidate's overall "image" and are visually communicative

on their own. In this manner, visual content serves as a connecting link between the fields of political communication and political branding.

Political Branding

Political branding—an approach that applies branding concepts and theories to political communication—has emerged as an aesthetic approach to the study of campaign communication (Pich & Newman, 2020; Scammell, 2015). Its central theory argues that in contemporary political practice, parties and candidates attempt to create their own brand identities, which combines with voters' perceptions of the political actor's image to form the entity's overall political brand (Scammell, 2015). This brand identity is used to differentiate political actors from one another in the eyes of the voter (Pich & Newman, 2020).

If "modern democratic politics is a battle of competing images," (Scammell, 2015, p. 3), then the candidate's brand is his or her suit of armor. Political branding encompasses all the visual elements of a candidate or party's identity, including physical appearance, style of dress, campaign communications, merchandise, and graphic design (Billard, 2018; Guzmán & Sierra, 2009; Horsbøl, 2006; Pich & Newman, 2020). Although political branding was originally conceptualized at the party level, with candidates viewed as individual products of that brand, recent scholarship has urged a shift toward viewing branding as a phenomenon that now occurs at the level of the candidate (Guzmán & Sierra, 2009). A candidate's individual brand aims to "educate the voter about their platform and campaign, differentiating themselves from other candidates, advocating the voter's decision-making process in their favor" (Bible, Crain, Daizovi, al Habsi, & Zhao, 2016, p. 27).

Campaign Typography Research

Despite its relevance to political branding and visual political communication, campaign typography remains underexplored. Extant empirical work on the topic argues that "typography influences attitudes toward the textual meaning it represents" (Billard, 2016, p. 4576) and is used in politics to express candidates' personality traits (Ahmed, 2013), becoming yet another heuristic that voters can use to evaluate candidates (Ditsch, 2012). Several case studies explore the effectiveness of specific typeface choices in greater detail (Ahmed, 2013; Billard, 2016; Seidman, 2010).

Typography is understood to work in tandem with a campaign's other aesthetic choices (Seidman, 2010). It "contributes to the development of political brands in two key ways: by crafting candidate image visually, and by increasing the economy of expression in campaign advertisements" (Billard, 2016, p. 4581). Horsbøl (2006) describes typography as a paratextual element, "a meeting point of the verbal and the visual" (p. 156). Exploring how typeface conveys meaning in candidate newspaper advertisements, he argues that typeface functions to differentiate candidates, address the reader (larger, heavier letterforms "shout"), and elaborate on verbal and imagistic content; if chosen correctly, typeface can reinforce the candidate's image (Horsbøl, 2006).

Typeface research also considers the role of professional designers who "play a key role in constructing the sign value and ethical surplus of their candidate clients" (Serazio, 2017, p. 238) by choosing typographic and other elements of a campaign's visual identity. This shift is thought to have improved the

quality of candidate logos themselves over time (Bible et al., 2016) and is in keeping with the broader professionalization of campaign practice, with political consultants receiving increased media attention in recent decades (Billard, 2016).

Practitioner Accounts of Typeface Selection

Designers highlight the deliberateness of a campaign's overall visual aesthetic through interviews with researchers and journalists. Much of this history focuses on Democratic presidential campaigns, namely those for Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. In contemporary presidential politics, designers anticipate their work will be adapted by supporters and become part of the historical record surrounding a campaign. For instance, Clinton's 2016 H logo was strategically designed with this versatility in mind so that it could be shared and reimagined in various forms (e.g., memes) across any medium (Billard, 2018; Merelli, 2015). Michael Bierut, designer of the Clinton H, echoed these sentiments in describing Obama's O logo as "an icon that's destined . . . to occupy the 2008 slot of any historical timeline drawn up a hundred years from now" (Bierut, 2010, p. xix).

Design intentionality does not stop with the creation of the logo. The Obama campaign enforced a unified visual appearance, moving design of all campaign materials in-house and creating an internal style guide to dictate typeface and color rather than let each state or field office produce their own materials (Kreiss, 2012; Thomas, 2010). Staff also conducted A/B tests to optimize design elements for the campaign's website and emails (Kreiss, 2012). By adopting a consistent visual narrative, designers for the campaign were able to "forge a cohesive visual vocabulary" (Thomas, 2010, p. 78). These accounts illustrate how branding is a process: Design choices are made by teams that carefully and systematically work to shape a candidate's image.

Beyond the overall logo, branding experts have pointed to typeface as the "linchpin" in a campaign's visual strategy because of its ability to "deliver words and ideas that are relevant to people" (Heller, 2010, p. xxi). Branding expert Brian Collins argued that the Obama campaign's choice of the Gotham typeface amplified the candidate's existing personality and was particularly well suited to rendering the word "change," offering an ideal marriage of message and typeface (Heller, 2010, pp. xxi–xxii). Font selections are not limited to branding the candidate: The Clinton campaign selected an opposition typeface for campaign materials referencing Donald Trump: Bureau Grot Compressed (Hillary for America Design Team, n.d.).

By explaining their strategies, presidential campaign designers highlight a campaign arena where visual identity of a candidate—and his or her opponent—is calculated, and typographical choices are critical. However, the Clinton and Obama campaigns represent iconic, historical moments (and big budgets), which likely added to the pressure to "get it right" with font choice. Conversely, not much is known about the design practices of candidates who seek office at the statewide, Congressional, or local level. Further investigation is needed to understand how campaigns more generally approach the decision to incorporate typography as an element of a candidate's visual identity.

This study conducts in-depth interviews with political consultants and graphic designers who engage with typeface selection for logos, wordmarks, and printed materials for candidates. Our qualitative exploration is guided by the following question:

RQ1:   How do graphic designers make decisions about typography in their projects?

Typeface Use "In the Wild"

Next, we consider how the phenomenon of typeface selection manifests itself in practice. If typeface is intended to convey meaning, then its choice is not random, and patterns will emerge in a quantitative content analysis of candidate logos. Because typefaces number in the thousands, we cannot analyze the choice of each specific typeface; instead, we rely on a taxonomy of typefaces that classifies fonts based on anatomical features and aesthetics (see McLean, 1980). We consider typeface family, categorized here as serif, sans serif, slab serif, and script and handwriting styles. Serif typefaces are characterized by the flourishes or "feet" on the ends of letters; sans serif is characterized by the lack of feet; slab serifs are a subset of serif in which the letterforms are thick and block-like; and script and handwriting typefaces mimic the curves and strokes of human writing. We illustrate typeface families in Figure 1 below using candidate logos included in our content analysis.

Serif

Morgan Griffith, VA-09

Sans Serif

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, NY-14

Script/Handwriting

Jaime Herrera Beutler, WA-03

Slab Serif

Bernie Sanders, VT-Sen

Figure 1. Examples of typeface family in 2018 candidate logos. Source: Center for American Politics and Design ([CAPD], 2019).

To understand variation in typeface family selection, we explore theoretically motivated variables: party affiliation, competitiveness, incumbency, and years in office. Prior work finds that serifs are viewed as more conservative than sans serifs (Haenschen & Tamul, 2020), so Republicans might choose serifs more often than Democrats, and Democrats choose sans serifs more often than Republicans. Competitive races are likely to raise more funds and have greater access to professional design consultants (e.g., Billard, 2016), which may result in different typeface selections. Incumbents are likely to reuse their logos in subsequent campaigns rather than develop a new identity, so their cumulative years in office may predict font choice. Finally, typeface family popularity varies over time: serifs were more popular from 1996 to 2012 (Bible et al., 2016), whereas post-2008, there has been a pivot from serifs to more geometric sans serifs (Berlow, 2010). Thus, longer-term incumbents may be likelier to retain serif typefaces from their original campaign logos, and their challengers may reflect more current trends in design.

We also include candidate sex, since script and handwriting typefaces might be viewed as more feminine (Brumberger, 2003; Shaikh, Chaparro, & Fox, 2006). Additionally, we explore state- and district-level effects in terms of geographic density and region, building on work emphasizing the role of urbanization and regionalization in politics and policy (Savitch & Vogel, 1996). Greater density may reflect a more cosmopolitan voter base who expects a certain style of design, and there may be regional differences in typeface intended to convey the Mountain West or South. We pose a research question:

RQ2:   *Does candidate (a) party, (b) competitiveness, (c) incumbency, (d) sex, (e) geographic density, or (f) region predict typeface family selection in 2018 logos?*

Given the influence of party in American politics, we explore the following:

RQ3:   *Does party moderate the effect of (a) competitiveness, (b) incumbency, or (c) sex on typeface family selection in 2018 logos?*

Study I: Practitioner Interviews

To determine how graphic designers approach typeface selection for political work, we conducted in-depth interviews during the summer of 2019 with consultants who work with political clients. Subjects consented to participating and being recorded; interviews were conducted via phone or video, structured around a flexible interview schedule, and transcribed with the assistance of a speech-to-type program.[1] We analyzed responses using an inductive approach to thematic analysis to allow patterns, commonalities, and differences to emerge from their statements.

Participants

Eight graphic designers were recruited to discuss their professional practices.[2] Participants were selected using convenience sampling: The authors contacted designers known to them or with whom they

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[1] Interview schedule available in the online supplement: https://osf.io/vfkcd/
[2] Another seven practitioners were contacted but did not follow up on interview requests.

shared personal contacts. At the time, each was employed as a professional in the graphic design industry or as a campaign consultant.

Five of our participants frequently worked with political campaigns designing various materials for candidates such as wordmarks and logos:

- Kelly Blanscet: founder of Graphic Granola, a design shop in Texas, who has worked with the Green Party and local candidates for office
- Brett Feinstein: a direct mail consultant based in Virginia who works with Republican candidates at the state legislative and congressional level
- Gill Sans[3]: owner of a union print shop in Virginia that manufactures campaign yard signs and produces direct mail
- Mark McCulloch: a graphic designer based in Texas who predominantly works with local Democratic and municipal candidates
- Ben Ostrower: founder and creative director of Wide Eye Creative, an agency that works with political candidates and advocacy organizations based in Washington, D.C.

The other designers we spoke to did not work primarily in politics but had extensive professional experience designing wordmarks and logos for advocacy groups:

- Greg Hedges: graphic designer in Syracuse, New York
- Lucida Bright[4]: art director, graphic designer, and researcher in Montreal, Quebec
- Nicole Smith: marketing director for a music company in Birmingham, Alabama

Analysis Method

We conducted a thematic analysis, inductively identifying themes through a close and iterative reading of the transcripts. The second author divided each designer's responses into discrete statements, usually at the sentence level. Statements were read and reread, and then grouped into clusters based on a common topic (Kvale, 1996); clusters were used to define themes from the interviews. The first author reviewed the statements and verified the groupings. After multiple readings of statements, no new themes emerged.

Results

Designers stress that typefaces are expressive though not inherently political, and they are chosen to convey information about the client. These choices are, in turn, constrained by legibility and functionality, specifically the need to render the candidate's name. Additionally, designers emphasize the way in which typeface selection is culturally situated. Together, these findings address RQ1. We begin with an overview of designers' processes, and then take up each theme.

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[3] Name has been changed.
[4] Name has been changed.

Political Design Processes

All but one of the designers stated that typeface selection is a carefully considered aspect of their work and a key part of developing a political client's image or brand. McCulloch and Ostrower said that the design process occurs very early in the campaign because it needs to be included in the candidate's initial print and digital materials when the candidate launches his or her campaign. Since competitiveness of the race (primary and general) is often unknown at that time, it does not influence the design process.

Each designer described a process he or she works through to narrow the near-infinite range of typefaces available and arrive at an optimal choice. Although precise steps varied, all were used to determine which typeface best suited the client. Two designers, Ostrower and Blanscet, begin with a candidate questionnaire to understand how the client sees him- or herself, using these qualities to inform typeface selection. However, designers noted they might not begin the selection process with a blank slate; three designers told the same story in which candidates came to them with a logo created by a friend or family member that the professional deemed unusable. The designers needed to convince the candidate to change it. This may explain why local or underfunded candidates who do not have access to professional designers may have substandard graphic design.

When choosing a typeface, the number of options under consideration varies among designers. Ostrower looks at a large library of typefaces and available Adobe fonts before applying typefaces to the candidate's name to see how the letters interact. He specifically looks at the letters C, E, and M, which he thinks are particularly distinctive between typefaces. Bright peruses websites that sell fonts to see what is available, occasionally buying a typeface meeting her selection criteria and filing it away for a current or future client. She prefers versatile fonts available in regular, bold, italic, heavy, and condensed versions. Conversely, Blanscet asks the client which typefaces he or she prefers, and either uses that option or relies on a set of favorites that express various personalities, choosing one to match the client.

McCulloch uses a systematic and deliberative process that starts with entering the client's name into a design program and laying out the name in uppercase, lowercase, and title case in a core set of 50 typefaces, which he prints and tapes to a wall. Printing the names out is a critical step for McCulloch because he can look at the typefaces and compare them quickly, mirroring the speed at which viewers read a campaign yard sign. After narrowing the typefaces to five finalists, he asks coworkers which they like most and forces them to decide quickly. McCulloch then consults with the candidate or client, at which point they may want to see different typefaces. About 80% of the time, the client chooses the typeface McCulloch suggests because his process had already eliminated those that the client specifically requests.

Conversely, Feinstein employs a selection criterion that is self-described as "not scientific." His process involves using easily recognizable and common typefaces and letterform shapes, pointing out that the campaigns he works with typically are not interested in spending the money to go through multiple iterations of wordmarks. However, he notes that if campaigns are considering print ad buys, then he thinks about how typesetting in that context might convey emotion.

Fonts are Expressive

For designers, typefaces are not merely expressions of language but rather expressions unto themselves. The designers agreed that typefaces convey a range of traits and qualities, determined by individual architectural elements such as serifs or letterform contrast and the interactions of these elements. These qualities evoked by the typeface spill over to the words written in the typeface, argues Bright. Interviewees described traits such as elegant, loud, modern, heavy, traditional, cool, friendly, authentic, approachable, and comfy. The designers point to various anatomical features of typefaces that convey these qualities, and although they tend to describe how a change in an anatomical feature can alter what the font expresses, the combination of features together is what expresses the typeface's personality.

When probed about typeface families, the designers readily attributed qualities to them. Hedges states that serif typefaces are classic in a stylistically luxurious way. To Blanscet, serifs convey distinctiveness, confidence, and timelessness; and although Bright notes serif typefaces tend to have more humanist characteristics and can feel warm, sans serifs tend to be more geometric. McCulloch tends to choose serifs for judicial candidates because he believes they appear somber, trustworthy, and a little more authoritarian. Hedges points out that there are serif typefaces that feel modern and sans serifs that feel old, and that it isn't the presence of serifs alone that convey those feelings, highlighting the complications inherent in pointing to a single anatomical feature as responsible for conveying personality. Conversely, Bright and Smith describe sans serifs as more modern, in part because they were developed relatively recently in the history of type.

Designers generally agreed that traits of the typeface need to match the identity of the candidate. Examples provided by the designers highlight this alignment. Blanscet says slab serifs come off feeling more "folksy," which Ostrower drew on in crafting U.S. Senate candidate Heidi Heitkamp's slab serif wordmark: The campaign wanted something that evoked North Dakota to show she represented the state and not Washington, D.C. Blanscet notes that all caps tend to indicate strength and confidence and title case can be friendlier, whereas lowercase can be seen as even friendlier. She points to Rubio's 2016 wordmark, which used an all-lowercase geometric typeface, indicating a forward-looking, young start-up. McCulloch rarely uses italics because they convey a sense of happiness and whimsy that people don't want in an elected official. What a typeface conveys can also be a characteristic of specific letterforms. Ostrower points to the high arch in the M in Obama's logo set in Gotham as conveying pride and strength.

Designers were divided on whether typefaces themselves have explicitly political qualities, mostly stating instead that the *traits* evoked by the typeface might have ideological associations. Blanscet says typefaces with stark and hard edges seem more conservative, whereas typefaces with a more humanist, grassroots feel to them convey liberalness. Hedges specifically pushes back against the notion that typefaces have ideologies and instead says they likely evoke feelings of oldness or modernness. He points to the 2000 Bush-Cheney logo as an example of a campaign that wanted to be seen as more modern and so used a sans serif typeface.

"Authenticity" and Consistency

According to the designers, typeface selection takes place in consideration of creating a graphical representation of the client that is consistent with the client's brand. Thus, the traits and qualities exhibited by the typeface need to correspond to the traits of the candidate. As Ostrower states, a good campaign wordmark should be a stand-in or an avatar for a candidate. Designers emphasized the importance of "authenticity," or the perceived congruence between the design and the beliefs and experiences of the candidate, or at least those that had been chosen for presentation to the public. The need to present this "authentic" version of the candidate constrains the message communicated through typeface selection.

Feinstein provides a contrasting viewpoint on branding, stating that as a designer, he is not interested in building a long-lasting relationship with voters or viewers of campaign materials. Rather, his strategy is to focus on the legibility, recognition, and recall of a candidate's name and to associate it with the Republican Party. For the most part, Feinstein states, he is interested in one specific action from voters: supporting his candidate in the current election. The voter might not have other contact with the candidate for several years, so Feinstein thinks that maintaining a brand is largely unnecessary.

Thus, according to the designers, typeface selection is informed foremost by its need to evoke some core characteristic about the candidate. Ostrower argues if the reaction that people have when viewing the logo is reflective of how they feel about the candidate, then the logo itself has done its job by reinforcing the brand. In his experience, people have an incredibly delicate sensibility, so choosing a typeface that matches the candidate is imperative. Ostrower described how it would be inauthentic for Bernie Sanders to show up to a campaign event wearing a tuxedo; Sanders is "a little bit disheveled and rumpled," so his typeface—Jubilat, a slab serif with a bunch of humanist touches—needs to match.

Legibility and Functionality

The second constraint faced by political designers is legibility, particularly in the context of rendering the candidate's name on signs and promotional materials. Legibility is critical for political design since campaign signs are meant to be read quickly and at a distance. Four designers cited legibility as a top issue, with two describing it as their overriding concern in designing campaign materials. Feinstein said that easily distinguishable and common letterforms are best suited to campaign signs because their goal is to increase name recall at the ballot box. McCulloch stated that the need for legibility overrides other considerations, such as the typeface's expressiveness or personality. For Sans, clarity of the name is critical because it conveys professionalism on the part of the candidate. Clarity is also important to Blanscet because yard signs require letterforms that are clean, immediate, and bold to be easily read.

In identifying typefaces that are highly legible, the designers pointed to several criteria they consider, though they disagree on how those features function. McCulloch and Sans state that serif fonts are more legible than sans serif typefaces, with Sans claiming that, in rural areas, serif typefaces like Times New Roman are more readable because audiences are more familiar with them. Conversely, Smith prefers sans serifs for large letters because the simpler letterforms are less likely to get muddled when viewed from a distance. McCulloch never uses display fonts in a campaign sign because their legibility breaks down at a distance.

Complicating legibility is the unique challenge of setting a person's name into a readable logo, regardless of length and how the letterforms flow together. Although other types of graphic design can work around difficult combinations of letters by changing a headline or sentence, designers cannot adjust the candidate's name. Designers identified strategies to handle names. Ostrower looks to see what combinations of letters stand out and decides on whether to use the candidate's first name, last name, or both. McCulloch describes how a name like "Needles" is difficult to work with because of loopy lowercase letters. By printing out the name in both lowercase and all caps, he can see that the all-caps arrangement of letters is more readable. Several designers stated they use letterforms from other typefaces to handle particularly challenging names; Ostrower occasionally "cheats" by altering letterforms himself if he needs a shape to be slightly different.

Typefaces are Culturally Situated

Finally, designers emphasized that typefaces are culturally situated: What a typeface conveys today may not be what it expresses in the future or to all individuals. Several designers spoke of having formal education about typography and design (Blanscet, Hedges) or building up a sensibility for typefaces and how people will interpret them through their careers (Bright, Sans). According to Hedges, a graphic designer needs to know enough about the audience to predict how they will interpret a logo. He points to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's campaign sign, which employs a typeface reminiscent of unionization campaigns and the Spanish language's inverted exclamation point, as an example of how historical and cultural knowledge is important and enabled the designer to use typeface to evoke a sense of a people's uprising. However, typefaces do not always evoke the same sentiments from all viewers. Sans claims that the Ocasio-Cortez logo would not be well-received in rural areas. There, he argues, simple typefaces that people are already familiar with will feel more approachable.

Typeface selection can also reflect broader trends in politics and design generally. Ostrower points to a current trend for Democratic candidates to use a high x-height with clean and bold letterforms to convey a sense of standing above Donald Trump. That trend might not continue in a different political context. Blanscet notes a general trend toward minimalist typography, thus its use in campaign logos is less about expressing an idea and more about modern advertising. If trends change, such type may look out of date. Indeed, one reason why Feinstein avoids spending a significant amount of time thinking about the expressiveness of typefaces is because perceptions of type can change over time, especially because of what the other party does with their artwork.

Study II: Content Analysis

To further assess the factors that predict typeface selection, we perform a content analysis of 908 logos from 2018 U.S. Congressional candidates for House and Senate. Given that the graphic designers claim typeface choice is deliberate, we expect to find significant differences in typeface selection based on candidate traits. Candidate logos were downloaded from the website for the CAPD (2019). Of the 917 candidates in the CAPD (2019) database, nine lacked a logo; thus, the final sample size is 908. Aesthetic coding was performed by the authors, with additional information about each candidate compiled from public sources.

Measures

Signs were coded according to presence or absence of first (82.9%, α = 1, agreement 100%) and last names (97.1%, α = 1, agreement 100%), and typeface family for each (first name typeface: α =.895; last name typeface: α =.86). Candidate party and sex was indicated in the CAPD logo database. House and Senate race competitiveness was coded according to the Cook Political Report (2018a, 2018b), then collapsed according to overall competitiveness (Tossup = 4; Lean Democratic = 3; Lean Republican = 3; Likely Democratic = 2; Likely Republican = 2; Safe Democratic = 1; Safe Republican = 1). Data on incumbent status and years in office (M = 4.02; SD = 6.92; range 0–45) was collected from the Ballotpedia. Density was coded based on CityLab's 2018 Congressional Density Index (Montgomery, 2018); state-level density was calculated using data made available from the author of the district-level analysis (Montgomery, personal communication). Region was coded based on second-level U.S. Census Bureau division. Further coding details and a frequency table are in the online supplement.[5]

Analysis Method

We perform multinomial logistic regression (Table 1, Table 2) with typeface family as the dependent variable, first setting sans serif as the reference category and then serif, to determine whether each independent variable impacts the odds of choosing another typeface family relative to the reference category (e.g., serif, slab serif, script or handwriting versus sans serif). To determine if the variable improves model fit, we use an additive R^2 approach, beginning with no independent variables and adding each individually, comparing the two models with an ANOVA to determine if model fit improvement is significant. To address our research questions, we consider *whether* the variable improves model fit, and, if so, take that as an affirmative answer; we then consider *how* each variable influences typeface family selection.

Results

Based on the variation in prevalence of first name (753 of 908 signs, 82.9%) and last name (882 of 908 signs, 97.1%), we first ascertain whether our variables of interest predict presence of first and last names in the logo (see Table A1, A2 in supplement). Men are less likely to put their first names in their logos and are likelier to include their last names relative to women; as population density increases, candidates are likelier to include their first names in their logos. We see variation in regional usage of first names: they are more common in the South Atlantic, West South Central, and Pacific states than in the Mid-Atlantic. Given these variations in first and last name use and the 6.9% (n = 63) incidence of multiple typeface families on a sign, we conduct our analysis separately for first and last names.

Variables Predicting Typeface Family

A multinomial logistic regression finds that party, competitiveness, incumbency, and sex all significantly predict typeface family choice for first names. Only competitiveness and incumbency do so for last names, with

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[5] Supplement available here: https://osf.io/vfkcd/

the former marginally significant. With these variables, we can explain 17.5% of variation in typeface family selection for first names and 14.7% for last names before considering interactions.

For first names, Republicans are likelier than Democrats to (a) use serif fonts and script or handwriting typefaces relative to sans serifs, (b) use script or handwriting typefaces than serifs, and (c) use serifs relative to slab serifs. Candidates running as members of other parties were likelier to use script or handwriting typefaces than Democrats. Party alone explains 3.3% of variance in typeface family selection in the 2018 logo corpus. Turning to last names, party does not significantly improve model fit overall, though again, Republicans are likelier to use serifs than sans serifs relative to Democrats. We have partial affirmation for RQ2a: Party predicts typeface family, but only for first names.

As district competitiveness increases, likelihood of using a serif font for first name decreases relative to using a sans serif font, whereas likelihood of using a script or handwriting typeface increases. We also find an increased probability of script or handwriting typeface use for first names relative to serif as competitiveness increases. Competitiveness explains approximately 2.2% of variation in typeface family choice among first names. For last names, however, the contribution is a marginally significant 0.9%, and none of the individual differences were significant. We have partial affirmation for RQ2b, but again only for first names.

Turning to incumbency, we see substantial effects of being an incumbent and years in office on typeface family selection for first and last names. For first names, incumbents are likelier to choose serifs than sans serifs relative to challengers, and less likely to choose slab serifs relative to serifs than challengers. Further, as years in office increase, incumbents are likelier to choose slab serifs over sans serifs. Together, these variables explain 8.8% of variation in typeface family selection for first names. For last names, we have similar findings: Incumbents are likelier to choose serifs than sans serifs relative to challengers, and less likely to choose script or handwriting fonts relative to challengers—and only about 4.8% as likely to do so. Incumbents are also much less likely to choose slab serifs or script or handwriting relative to challengers. Longer terms in office increase the likelihood of choosing serifs and script or handwriting over sans serifs, and script or handwriting over serifs. Overall incumbency explains 8.0% of variation in typeface family for last names in logos, amounting to the most substantial prediction of any variables tested. Thus, we have a positive answer to RQ2c.

Next, we consider candidate sex. Male candidates are significantly less likely to use script or handwriting than female candidates for first names and are significantly likelier than females to use slab serifs than serifs. Sex explains 1.5% of variance in typeface family selection for first names; there is no impact on last names. We have partial affirmation for RQ2d.

Finally, we find no significant impact on model fit from either density or region in terms of first name or last name, though we do find substantial differences within regions, and for first names, region approaches marginal significance.[6] This may be because of inadequate statistical power—we have only 753 and 882 logos to analyze, and the number of logos per region varies because of population, number of districts, and presence of a U.S. Senate race. We answer RQ2e and RQ2f in the negative.

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[6] When region is added to the model for first name, the incremental R^2 of 4.5% approaches marginal significance, $p = .106$.

The Moderating Effect of Party

Given the role that partisanship plays in our U.S. political process, we explore whether party moderates the effects of candidate-level variables. For instance, Republican women—who comprise 17.0% of Senate Republicans and 6.6% of House Republicans—might approach their visual branding differently than Democratic women, who comprise 37.8% of Democrats in the Senate and 37.8% in the House (Center for American Women and Politics, 2020).

First, we consider competitiveness, reported in Table A3 and A4 in the online supplement. The moderating effect of party on competitiveness is significant for first names, explaining an additional 5.1% of variance in typeface family selection. Specifically, as competitiveness increases, Republicans become likelier to choose serifs over sans serifs relative to Democrats for first names only. As competitiveness increases, Republicans are likelier to use script or handwriting than Democrats. Notably, adding this interaction term makes the main effect of Republican versus Democratic Party on typeface family nonsignificant; thus, only as a district becomes more competitive are Republicans likelier to use serifs relative to Democrats. There is no significant moderating effect on last names in terms of improving model fit, though, again, as competitiveness increases, Republicans are likelier to use serifs than sans serifs compared with Democrats. We find no moderating effect of party on incumbency or sex for first name or last. Thus, we have an affirmative answer for RQ3a, since competitiveness moderates the effect of party, and a negative answer for RQ3b and RQ3c.

Table 1. Multinomial Logistic Regression, Variables Predicting First Name Typeface Family.

	Sans Serif as Baseline			Serif as Baseline	
	Serif (n = 202)	Slab Serif (n = 41)	Script-Hand-Display (n = 33)	Slab Serif (n = 41)	Script-Hand-Display (n = 33)
Party					
Republican	2.05*** (1.40–3.00)	0.88 (0.44–1.77)	6.11*** (2.50–14.92)	0.43* (0.21–0.90)	2.98* (1.19–7.49)
Other	2.99 (0.69–12.96)	2.15 (0.22–20.94)	14.22* (1.28–158.82)	0.72 (0.06–8.36)	4.77 (0.37–60.64)
Incremental R² (%): 3.3%**					
Competitiveness	0.77* (0.60–0.99)	1.03 (0.69–1.54)	1.47* (1.02–2.12)	1.34 (0.86–2.10)	1.91** (1.27–2.88)
Incremental R² (%): 2.2%**					
Incumbent	1.80* (1.14–2.86)	0.63 (0.25–1.57)	0.92 (0.34–2.49)	0.35* (0.13–0.91)	0.51 (0.18–1.42)
Years in Office	1.04* (1.01–1.08)	1.06* (1.00–1.12)	1.05 (0.99–1.12)	1.02 (0.96–1.08)	1.01 (0.95–1.08)
Incremental R² (%): 8.8%***					
Sex = Male	0.73 (0.48–1.10)	1.88 (0.83–4.28)	0.33* (0.14–0.77)	2.58* (1.08–6.14)	0.46+ (0.19–1.09)
Incremental R² (%): 1.5%*					
Density	0.91 (0.79–1.05)	1.01 (0.78–1.30)	0.89 (0.67–1.19)	1.11 (0.84–1.45)	0.98 (0.73–1.32)
Incremental R² (%): 0.5%					
Region					
New England	3.70* (1.31–10.42)	0.52 (0.05–5.16)	6.70+ (0.91–49.09)	0.14 (0.01–1.52)	1.81 (0.23–14.49)
Mid-Atlantic	1.54 (0.61–3.87)	0.68 (0.16–2.92)	1.55 (0.23–10.36)	0.44 (0.09–2.25)	1.01 (0.13–7.60)
South Atlantic	1.33 (0.56–3.15)	0.91 (0.26–3.18)	1.16 (0.19–6.98)	0.68 (0.16–2.85)	0.87 (0.13–5.90)
E. South Central	3.92** (1.42–10.84)	2.62 (0.59–11.71)	0.00*** (0.00–0.00)	0.67 (0.13–3.41)	0.00*** (0.00–0.00)
W. South Central	2.31+ (0.95–5.59)	0.35 (0.06–2.05)	1.82 (0.27–12.44)	0.15 (0.02–1.00)	0.79 (0.11–5.94)
E. Midwest	1.57 (0.85–3.77)	1.12 (0.31–4.01)	2.16 (0.37–12.59)	0.71 (0.17–3.03)	1.38 (0.21–9.03)
W. Midwest	1.94 (0.73–5.18)	0.56 (0.09–3.32)	3.11 (0.50–19.34)	0.29 (0.04–1.98)	1.60 (0.23–11.33)
Mountain					
Pacific	2.23+ (0.95–5.24)	0.69 (0.18–2.69)	3.19 (0.60–16.89)	0.31 (0.07–1.40)	1.43 (0.24–8.48)
Incremental R² (%): 4.5%					
Intercept	0.24** (0.09–0.67)	0.06*** (0.01–0.32)	0.00*** (0.00–0.00)	0.25 (0.04–1.56)	0.06* (0.01–0.57)
Cumulative R² (%): 17.5%					

Note. N = 753; + *p* < .10; * *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01; *** *p* < .001. Odds Ratios (OR) with 95% Confidence Intervals. ORs below 1 indicate a lower probability of choosing that font compared with the baseline; ORs above 1 indicate a higher probability of choosing that font compared with the baseline, and in the case of factor variables (party, incumbency, sex, region), relative to the omitted category.

Table 2. Multinomial Logistic Regression, Variables Predicting Last Name Typeface Family.

	Sans Serif as Baseline			Serif as Baseline	
	Serif (n = 227)	Slab Serif (n = 53)	Script-Hand-Display (n =1 8)	Slab Serif (n = 53)	Script-Hand-Display (n = 18)
Party					
Republican	1.42* (1.01–2.01)	0.87 (0.48–1.59)	2,78+ (0.85–9.07)	0.62 (0.32–1.17))	1.95 (0.59–6.53)
Other	2.63 (0.62–11.23)	1.76 (0.19–16.26)	10.21+ (0.78–133.40)	0.67 (0.06–7.26)	3.88 (0.26–58.11)
Incremental R^2: 1.2%					
Competitiveness	0.84 (0.67–1.05)	0.92 (0.63–1.34)	0.96 (0.50–1.85)	1.10 (0.73–1.67)	1.15 (0.58–2.26)
Incremental R^2: 0.9%+					
Incumbent	1.82** (1.19–2.79)	0.74 (0.33–1.63)	0.05** (0.01–0.39)	0.40* (0.18–0.93)	0.03*** (0.00–0.22)
Years in Office	1.04* (1.01–1.07)	1.04 (0.98–1.10)	1.18*** (1.09–1.27)	1.00 (0.95–1.06)	1.13** (1.05–1.22)
Incremental R^2: 8.0%***					
Male	1.05 (0.71–1.56)	1.92+ (0.90–4.07)	1.65 (0.42–6.44)	1.82 (0.82–4.09)	1.57 (0.39–6.32)
Incremental R^2: 0.5%					
Density	0.92 (0.81–1.04)	0.92 (0.74–1.15)	1.06 (0.72–1.55)	1.00 (0.79–1.27)	1.15 (0.78–1.70)
Incremental R^2: 0.5%					
Region					
New England	2.42+ (0.93–4.61)	0.00*** (0.00–0.00)	3.11 (0.25–38.34)	0.00*** (0.00–0.00)	1.28 (0.09–17.90)
Mid-Atlantic	1.83 (0.79–4.24)	1.45 (0.41–5.11)	0.55 (0.03–9.55)	0.79 (0.19–3.31)	0.30 (0.02–5.65)
South Atlantic	1.48 (0.67–3.27)	0.95 (0.28–3.24)	2.06 (0.22–19.52)	0.64 (0.16–2.56)	1.39 (0.13–14.50)
E. South Central	4.60** (1.83–11.55)	2.76 (0.68–11.16)	0.00*** (0.00–0.00)	0.60 (0.13–2.74)	0.00*** (0.00–0.00)
W. South Central	2.26+ (0.99–5.17)	1.11 (0.29–4.20)	0.83 (0.05–14.06)	0.49 (0.11–2.15)	0.37 (0.20–6.70)
E. Midwest	2.07+ (0.93–4.61)	1.35 (0.39–4.62)	1.13 (0.09–13.44)	0.65 (0.16–2.61)	0.55 (0.04–7.06)
W. Midwest	2.05 (0.82–5.13)	1.18 (0.27–5.09)	2.71 (0.22–33.19)	0.58 (0.11–2.91)	1.32 (0.10–17.90)
Mountain					
Pacific	2.43* (1.09–5.41)	1.08 (0.29–3.99)	1.51 (0.15–15.01)	0.45 (0.11–1.89)	0.62 (0.06–6.73)
Incremental R^2: 3.6%					
Intercept	0.16*** (0.06–0.41)	0.07*** (0.02–0.33)	0.01** (0.00–0.15)	0.45 (0.08–2.42)	0.05+ (0.00–1.02)
Cumulative R^2 = 14.7%					

Note. N = 882; + *p* < .10; * *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01; *** *p* < .001. Odds Ratios with 95% Confidence Intervals. See note on Table 1.

Discussion

Typeface use by political campaigns is itself a form of political communication. As with candidate message development, typeface choice is intended to convey meaning about the candidate. Through interviews with graphic designers and a content analysis of candidate logos, we demonstrate that these meanings include candidates' personalities, partisanships, and sex. Political designers select typefaces to convey the candidate's personality; this selection is constrained by the need to render the candidate's name. The significant differences in the content analysis offer further evidence of this deliberateness: the relationships among candidate traits, electoral characteristics, and typeface family selection demonstrate that typefaces are not chosen at random.

Our findings add depth to prior research pertaining to political typography. Designers emphasized the degree to which typefaces convey personality traits, which, in turn, should correspond authentically to the candidate, echoing previous political and nonpolitical research (e.g., Ahmed, 2013; Brumberger, 2003; Shaikh et al., 2006). In the content analysis, Republicans' higher probability of selecting a serif relative to Democrats is consistent with research showing that serifs are perceived as more conservative than sans serifs (Haenschen & Tamul, 2020). As races increase in competitiveness, candidates are less likely to use serifs than sans serif, reflecting trends in design described by designers and scholars alike (Bible et al., 2016; Billard, 2016). Incumbency status and years in office predict increased likelihood of using a serif than sans serif. These logos may date back to 1996–2012 when serifs were more popular (Bible et al., 2016), given candidates' hesitation to change logos once in office. Despite regional stereotypes in politics about voters and candidates, we find no meaningful evidence of typeface variation based on density or region of the country.

We find several areas of overlap between our qualitative and quantitative approaches, in terms of how candidate party and sex affect logo design. Our content analysis finds Republicans are likelier to use serifs relative to Democrats, whereas Democrats are likelier to use sans serifs. The designers provided additional insight by pointing out that serifs and sans serifs are not conservative or liberal, per se. Rather, they argued that combinations of anatomical features elicit perceptions or sentiments associated with liberalness or conservativeness. This is a key finding suggesting that graphic designers are aware that typefaces can convey subtle ideological meanings and consequently make typeface selections with this in mind.

The content analysis shows that most differences in typeface selection manifest in use of the first name, present in only 82.9% of logos. Graphic designers appear to use first names to differentiate candidates. Female candidates are likelier to include first names on their signs than males; without a female first name on a sign, voters might assume that the candidate is male. Sex is a powerful predictor of typeface family: Women are likelier to use feminine script or handwriting typefaces in their signs for their first names and less likely to use slab serifs, suggesting that first name cues gender both denotatively (the name is female) and connotatively (the typeface is feminine). Since the designers indicated they actively consider how typefaces influence messaging, it is likely that the decision to include a female candidate's first name on a campaign sign is a similarly deliberate choice. One designer independently confirmed this, remarking on the importance of using the sign to signal a candidate's female sex or minority race.[7]

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[7] In his interview, McCulloch stated that in a field with male or white candidates, a Hispanic or female first name on a sign could generate support in a way not possible by excluding those portions of a candidate's identity.

Limitations and Next Steps

We spoke to only a handful of graphic designers; there is likely far more complexity in the universe of graphic design practice than what we have identified here. Encouragingly, there were striking similarities between the designers and their thinking on type. Relatedly, the designers we talked to were selected because they were perceived as being good at their craft. As some of the designers noted, political artwork varies in quality; some campaigns may not hire professional designers, which could explain variation in the corpus of campaign logos. We connect these findings to Zenner's (2019) work on low-quality graphic design, which some individuals prefer because of commonality and perceived authenticity. Therefore, we cannot assume that low-quality designs are unintentionally so.

Our content analysis of campaign signs is still concerned only with a single cycle. It is possible that the findings here are limited to this cycle and its idiosyncrasies—such as the Democratic "wave" led by female candidates in response to the 2016 election of Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton. Further, we did not explore whether the logos were designed by professionals or amateurs. Although we find significant patterns in typeface family, we cannot be certain that these are solely attributable to intentional choices made by designers. Though designers stressed the importance of authenticity in conveying personality traits through design, we did not attempt to assess candidate personalities or the personalities of their fonts on logos. Future research is needed to assess the alignment between candidates' personalities and their wordmarks.

Finally, we were unable to study individual typeface selection since there were too many variations; serif, sans serif, and slab serif are rough categorizations that fail to capture other factors, such as whether a typeface is more humanist or geometric.

Conclusion

This study generates detailed, in-depth knowledge about how typeface functions in political campaign communication for candidates seeking a range of offices. We find that typeface selection is intended to convey information about a candidate, including their personality traits. However, typeface choice is constrained by its political context: legibility is paramount to increase name identification, and the logo must use the letters in the candidate's name, regardless of its length or awkwardness. The deliberateness of design choice plays out in our content analysis, which finds differences in typeface family selection based on candidates' party, sex, incumbency, years in office, and electoral competitiveness. Typeface plays a role in developing a candidate's political brand and differentiating the candidate from opponents.

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