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Presidential Candidates Apparently Blink at Their Own Peril

Scholars and political prognosticators have devised numerous approaches to making election predictions. Add analysis of blinking to the list.

And on that score, Barack Obama is projected to win in November because John McCain has blinked more than the Democrat during their debates, according to Joseph Tecce, a psychology professor at Boston College who has written a paper about blinking in debates.

Rapid blinking is an indicator of stress, Mr. Tecce said in an interview with Gatehouse News Service. Most people blink 10 to 20 times per minute, a rate that increases to 30 to 50 times per minute if they're in front of a television camera, he said.

Senator McCain blinked 109 times per minute during the first presidential debate this fall, while Senator Obama blinked 73 times per minute, according to Mr. Tecce, who said that the gap persisted in the following two debates.

The professor said that the candidate who has blinked the most during debates has lost every presidential election since 1976, except for in 2000. George W. Bush blinked more than Al Gore, and lost the popular vote, but captured the White House.

To be fair, Senator Obama displayed some unappealing body language in the debates too, Mr. Tecce told Reuters. The Democrat tended to look at the ground more than his Republican challenger, he said.

But voters seem not to care as much about those visual cues as they do about rapid blinking, he said. When viewers pick up on the blinking, they seem to think, “There’s something about him that’s awfully twitchy and nervous, and I don’t think I want to vote for that guy,” Mr. Tecce said in an interview with Reuters.

Sara Hebel | Posted on Thursday October 16, 2008