



MARK BENNETT: Appearances may sway voters, but shouldn't overshadow serious campaign issues

By Mark Bennett
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TERRE HAUTE— Imagine Abraham Lincoln running for president in 2008. A campaign consultant — eyes squinted, arms folded — studies The Great Emancipator's appearance and tells him what he needs to fix ...

"Lose the beard, Abe. You're a political candidate, not Jerry Garcia. And the stovepipe hat, it's so '60s — 1860s, that is. Get rid of it. And those speeches — no more 'four score and seven years ago.' What's up with that? Use phrases like, 'I'll take that under consideration,' and 'We must re-evaluate our position.' And are you ever going to update your blog we set up on your Web site?"

It's cynical to think Lincoln couldn't possibly get elected president today, but you have to wonder.

A few years ago, Princeton University researchers asked participants in a study to look at mugshots of actual opposing congressional candidates — with whom they were unfamiliar — for a mere one second, and then to judge which candidate was more competent. Surprisingly, the participants' choices won the elections in 71.6 percent of the U.S. Senate races and 66.8 percent of those in the House of Representatives.

As voters, we want to believe we're sincerely looking for competency, but what is that conclusion based upon? Though Americans may not want to acknowledge it, photogenic faces are not going unnoticed in Washington, D.C., these days. In its July 24 edition, The Hill — a newspaper devoted to coverage of Congress — published its fourth annual "50 Most Beautiful People on Capitol Hill." And The Hill's No. 1 spot went to ... Indiana's 8th District congressman, Brad Ellsworth.

John Lennon and The Beatles, poking fun at their popularity, once asked in a song, "How does it feel to be one of the beautiful people?" Well, Ellsworth seems to have downplayed his selection, issuing this response through his press secretary, Elizabeth Farrar: "The list is all in good fun, but the congressman is convinced his mother must have an in with the selection committee."

But the woman who supervised the process — Betsy Rothstein, The Hill's capital living editor — said a team of reporters studied 300 nominees, before choosing the final list. Democrats outnumber Republicans by a 2-to-1 ratio, but past Top 50s were GOP-dominated. Most of the current choices are twenty- and thirtysomethings who work as aides for senators or representatives or lobbyists, and there's even a Washington Redskins cheerleader. There are, though, a few lawmakers, including Ellsworth, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi (impressively taking the No. 4 spot at age 67), and Rep. Connie Mack (R-Fla.), who is the great-grandson of the Baseball Hall-of-Famer by the same name, at No. 5. The Hill's bio of Mack informs us that he is "in a relationship with Rep. Mary Bono (R-Calif.)."

Anything can
be an issue

Ellsworth is the first lawmaker to top The Hill's charts. Rothstein said the unassuming 48-year-old former Vanderburgh County sheriff would have made the paper's list regardless of outside nominations.

The Hill's content is typically filled with tales of daily turmoil inside Congress. Its top story on Friday focused on how Pennsylvania Democrat John Murtha, the chairman of the House Appropriations defense panel, steered \$150 million in earmarked money to his home district. "Pork" is the term The Hill used for Murtha's slice of the 2008 military spending bill.

"The 50 Most Beautiful People on Capitol Hill" is just a fun diversion for the newspaper, Rothstein explained, and it has become one of its most popular editions. While it also draws some criticism for overshadowing serious news and trivializing politics, the Top 50 has not yet become a campaign liability for any included lawmakers during the past four years, Rothstein said. Nobody's yet been branded a lightweight.

"You can make anything a campaign issue," she said, "but I haven't seen that happen."

On the other hand, is physical appearance a vote-getting edge for lawmakers in the Top 50 such as Ellsworth, Pelosi, Mack, Rep. Mary Fallin (R-Okla.), Rep. Yvette Clarke (D-N.Y.), Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio) and Rep. Heath Shuler (D-N.C.)?

"Voters are not pure, rational beings, and appearance does matter," said Jeremy Bailenson, an assistant professor of communication at Stanford University, where researchers have studied how the familiarity of a

candidate's face affects voters.

Fellow Stanford researcher Shanto Iyengar acknowledged there is evidence that Americans often base votes on superficial reasoning, and emphasized the importance of more informed decisions.

"Having a pleasant demeanor and an attractive appearance is always a plus, whether it be marketing or politics," Iyengar said by telephone last week from the Stanford campus in Palo Alto, Calif. "But it's not something I'd put up there with [a decision on] whether we withdraw troops from Iraq or whether you're a Republican or a Democrat."

Greg Goode is counting such meaningful issues. On Wednesday, the 34-year-old Terre Hautean announced his intention to seek the Republican nomination in the 2008 race for the 8th District seat, and will likely become Ellsworth's challenger. Goode dismissed the difficulty of running against a guy who just topped a list of the most beautiful people in Washington.

"The average American voter doesn't pay a whole lot of attention to those kinds of things," Goode said. Instead, he criticized the current Congress for failing to offer short- and long-term solutions to the war in Iraq, immigration, taxes and energy alternatives. Of course, a 12-year Republican reign in Congress ended last November, when Ellsworth and 41 other newcomer Democrats won House seats. The ouster of dozens of Republican incumbents, including former Rep. John Hostettler in the 8th District, was fueled by voter frustration with President Bush's handling of the war.

When asked whether he could buck the nation's top Republican, Bush, Goode said, "I'll borrow the self-assessment of my good friend [Indiana Congressman] Mike Pence who said, 'I'm a Christian first, then a conservative and then a Republican.'"

Preparations under way

His task against Ellsworth won't be easy. Ellsworth identified himself as a conservative in his campaign against the staunchly right-wing Hostettler, insisted he would not be beholden to the Democratic leadership and then won with a 61-percent landslide. Ellsworth's recent votes on major issues indeed reflect some independence. He voted with his party to repeal of tax cuts to oil companies, to express opposition to Bush's Iraq troop surge, and to approve a bill to provide \$124.2 billion for the Iraq and Afghanistan wars while also setting benchmarks and timetables for troop withdrawals (which the president vetoed).

In July, though, Ellsworth voted against fellow Democrats on a House bill that would require President Bush to begin reducing U.S. troop numbers in 120 days and have most withdrawn from Iraq by April 1, 2008. Ellsworth was the only Indiana Democrat and one of just 10 in the entire House to oppose that bill.

While expressing disappointment in military progress reports, Ellsworth insisted that U.S. commander Gen. David Petraeus should have until September to fully gauge the effectiveness of Bush's troop buildup. "At that point, once we have received both [July and September military] reports, Congress will be best able to reassess this country's course of action and determine the best path forward in Iraq," Ellsworth said.

Rightfully, that conflict will play a key role in voters' choices for not only the upcoming 8th District race — which the national Republican and Democrat congressional committees poured more than \$1 million each into in 2006 — but also the 2008 presidential campaign.

According to the Congressional Quarterly, Democrats are already preparing for the congressional contests. At the urging of party leaders, the 42 freshmen Democrats such as Ellsworth have raised an average of \$520,000 each in the first half of 2007. Ellsworth's actual total is slightly below that average, having raised \$499,000 so far this year for the 2008 race, according to CQ.

"Some people say of an August 1 announcement — with the election more than a year away — that it's awfully early," Goode said, "but we've got some work to do."

In response, Ellsworth acknowledged that voters in his district have many more months to make up their minds. "It's a long time between now and the election in November 2008," Ellsworth said. "I wish [Goode] well in the primary season. I'm going to keep my focus on serving the people of the 8th District."

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