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## Beauty and the Candidate

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With a life-long interest in political leadership, I thought I had seen it all: from selfless and inspiring to venal and creepy -- and all points in between.

But I was simply unprepared for Christine O'Donnell, the Tea Party-backed candidate running for a Delaware U.S. Senate seat. I can say with confidence that of all who have aspired to take their place along side the greats in legislative history, she is the only one to ever tell voters: "I am not a witch."

Claimer of dubious educational credentials -- check. Manager of questionable personal finances - - check. User of campaign funds to pay the rent -- check. Crusader against masturbation -- check. User of the word "unfactual" on ABC news -- check. But not a witch.

That got me thinking -- what if she looked like a witch, all scraggily-haired, boney-knuckled and warty? My guess: she would be as visible on the national political scene as her county's clerk of courts.

The Tea Party found themselves another telegenic woman of vaporous qualifications -- Palin lite. I know, Palin was a governor. But it was less than one term overseeing a tiny population and accomplishing virtually nothing -- hardly the usual springboard to the second highest office in the land. Compared to O'Donnell, those qualifications are downright Churchillian.

Chestnut hair, warm eyes and an infectious grin should disqualify no one from higher office. It worked for the Kennedys. But when those are the sum of the qualifications -- aside, of course, from alerting us that genetic engineers are creating mice with human brains (dump your Orkin stock) -- then I think appearance is a worthwhile avenue of inquiry.

Drop the protest signs and face the facts: she was plucked from the side-show division of political obscurity because of her looks. Not that there's anything wrong with that. Or unusual.

In the wake of a heavily airbrushed election poster of Prime Minister David Cameron (experts say he got a slimmer nose, more hair and pouty lips), the U.K's Telegraph reported a study on the connection between looks and electability.

The association of appearance and popularity is as old as junior high, but The University of Helsinki actually quantified it. The Telegraph reports that 1,992 photos of political candidates were shown to 10,011 people. Affiliation wasn't mentioned -- just that they were politicians.

The interviewees were asked to rate the photos on a scale of attractiveness and perceived qualifications. For every small increase in the attractiveness rating, there was a much larger jump in perceived competence, trustworthiness and other qualities you might like to have in a public servant.

On the Helsinki scale, O'Donnell doubtless gets a nice bump -- especially from those loyalists who get the Palin vibe. It got her one election away from the Senate.

It also might keep her out.

She strode into the public arena with video evidence of her thoughts on sexual purity and the dark arts trailing her like toilet paper on a shoe. The blazingly obvious irony is that if she wasn't attractive, she wouldn't have been on MTV or Bill Maher in the first place, and the videos would have never happened. Henry Waxman doesn't have these problems.

If Christine O'Donnell is a witch, she's a cute one. Today, with enough financial backing and some positions just to the right of crazy -- that might be enough.