

Study: Evolutionary past may determine how we choose leaders

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Did the fact that Obama is over six feet tall influence US voters?

(PhysOrg.com) -- Why did Barack Obama win the US election and did the fact he is over six feet tall influence the voters? The authors of a paper published in *Current Biology* this month argue that due to 'a hangover from our evolutionary past' factors like age, sex, height and weight play a major part in the determining our choice of leaders.

Professor Mark van Vugt, an Associate Member of the Institute for Cognitive and [Evolutionary Anthropology](#) at the University of Oxford and an author of the paper, said: 'Traits like height, age, gender, masculinity/femininity, and weight all appear to matter when we vote for our leaders. These are likely hangovers from our evolutionary past - ancestral leadership prototypes that are context-dependent.'

'When we face particular threats, like war, these elicit particular prototypes, such as the need for a masculine leader. Therefore, leaders who match these ancestral prototypes have a better chance of being elected.'

The article says that although human societies continue to rely heavily on political, economic, military, professional and religious leaders to function effectively, there is a consistently high rate of leadership failure. Nearly three quarters of business failures in corporate America are due to managerial incompetence, the study points out.

It asks whether new approaches might be useful in understanding when and why human leadership succeeds and fails - including Nature's own lessons on what works best in different contexts.

Author Dr Andrew King, from the Zoological Society of London, said: 'Evolution has fashioned principles governing leadership and followership over many millions of years. We need to ground the complex, even mystical, social phenomenon of leadership in science. Through empirical observation, [theoretical models](#), neuroscience, [experimental psychology](#), and genetics, we can explore the development and adaptive functions of leadership and followership.

'This analysis of data, combined with an evolutionary perspective on leadership, might highlight potential mismatches so we can see how evolved mechanisms of leadership are possibly out of kilter with our relatively novel social environment.'

Author Dr Dominic Johnson, from the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Edinburgh, said: 'The role of leadership has often been overlooked in the natural sciences - especially its important but under-explored role in the evolution of cooperation, yet it is arguably one of the most important themes in the social sciences.

There are converging ideas and developments in both the natural and social sciences that suggest that leadership and followership share common properties across humans and other animals, and these point to evolutionary origins.

'By identifying such origins and examining which aspects are shared with other animals offers us better ways of understanding, predicting and improving [leadership](#) today.'

Provided by Oxford University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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