

# Does a competent leader make a good friend?

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New research shows that when we elect leaders and politicians we tend to prefer dominant-looking, masculine men, but when we are looking to make new friends we seek the opposite.

Imagine you've travelled back in time to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and you're on board a ship far out in the [open sea](#). Pirates lurk close by, ready to attack. Who would you want to be the captain of your ship? The mild and friendly John? Or Christopher, with his square jaw, bushy brows and thin lips, who radiates dominance and physical strength? Chances are you would choose Christopher.

But why is that? When we are threatened by another group, it is deeply rooted in us to search for a strong leader to take control of the situation. More or less subconsciously, we let ourselves be influenced by the [physical appearance](#) of our leaders and politicians, and we tend to prefer different features in our leaders depending on whether we are in a state of peace or war.

Researchers Lasse Laustsen and Michael Bang Petersen from Aarhus University have now added an extra dimension to this knowledge in an article published in the acclaimed journal *Evolution and Human Behavior*. Their research shows that preferences in appearance are contingent on the context but also on our different perceptions of social conflict. Moreover, they have examined the extent to which the competent manager or leader is also a good friend.

## We prefer less dominant friends

We don't generally prefer people who appear dominant. In fact, when we go searching for friends, we look for something quite different. We have closer bonds with our friends, which makes us more vulnerable to exploitation by those who are self-absorbed, unreliable and dominant. Accordingly, most people will choose non-dominant and cooperative people to be their friends. Returning to the scenario on the ship, this means that we would prefer John as our cabin mate, regardless of the dangers that lurk out there.

It is mostly when we experience conflict between people that we need a figure who can lead in the battle against the enemy. In the fight against nature, we don't go looking for the same dominant leaders. In fact, if we are threatened by a storm while aboard the ship, we will look for a leader who can consolidate the group and foster strong relations. After all, the dominant leader will not be able to put up much of a fight against the elements.

## **Conservatives prefer dominant features more often**

Laustsen and Petersen emphasise that political ideology is suggestive of how we as individuals perceive conflict. As opposed to liberals, conservatives generally view the social world as more competitive, they tend to value group-based inequality more, and they perceive those outside the group as more threatening. It therefore makes sense that conservatives typically prefer a more dominant looking leader than liberals.

On the other hand, neither context nor our perceptions of conflict have anything to say when we choose friends. It doesn't matter whether you are conservative or liberal, whether you find yourself in a state of war or peace or you're being threatened by the elements, you will still choose non-dominant [friends](#).

Provided by Aarhus University

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