

A winning face depends on the culture of the voter

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In this busy election season, what role does culture play in voter's minds as they view the candidates running for office? In a recent study of elections comparing candidate faces in the U.S. and Taiwan, researchers showed that in winning an actual election, perceived competence plays a more important role for candidates in the U.S. than for those in Taiwan. In contrast, perceived social competence was more vital for candidates in Taiwan than for those in the U.S.

The results appear in "Culture Matters: The Looks of a Leader Are Not All the Same," published in *Social Psychological and Personality Science*.

For the study, participants in the U.S. and Taiwan were presented with pairs of faces of competing political [candidates](#) who were running against each other. The faces were randomly selected from an image pool of U.S. [political candidates](#) (U.S. Senate) and Taiwanese political candidates (Taiwan Legislative Yuan) in past elections.

Participants rated the candidates' [personality traits](#) including competence, social competence, and trustworthiness. The perceived personality traits were then used to predict the difference in the percentage of votes that the candidates received in the actual elections.

Participants also made their own voting choices, which became the "hypothetical election results" for the study. The Taiwanese participants showed a voting preference for candidates judged higher in social competence and trustworthiness while the U.S. participants favored

faces judged to be competent.

"The functions of the basic dimensions of social perception and judgment are culturally bound," says Dr. Fang Fang Chen, professor of psychology at the University of Delaware when the study was conducted, now a visiting professor at the University of Pennsylvania.

U.S. individualism makes the trait of competence, such as getting things done, a higher value for U.S. voters than a more closely knit culture like Taiwan, where [social competence](#) is more valued, according to the researchers.

The authors recognize that in actual elections, voters assess other important information including party affiliation and views on significant issues.

In addition to understanding how culture influences voters' preferences in different societies, the research also applies to the changing global economy.

"As the U.S. is becoming increasingly multicultural and global business is on the rise, it is essential to understand the influence of culture on the basic principles in the perception and judgment of social targets, which has direct impact on daily social interactions, job evaluations and promotion, and the selection of leaders," says Chen.

Provided by Society for Personality and Social Psychology

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