

Alpha leaders tend to be front-runner candidates

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Credit: London Business School

The tenets of Social Darwinism may have lost favor long ago, but the rise of political populism in the 21st Century continues to support the maxim that "the strong survive", and are most adept at leading during challenging times.

Research conducted by Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour Niro Sivanathan and PhD candidate Hemant Kakkar at London Business School reveals that in times of uncertainty dominant leaders are preferred over respected and admired candidates.

The research, titled 'When the appeal of a dominant leader is greater than a prestige leader' (published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, June 2017), also reflects on and is informed by evolutionary theory, in which dominance and prestige are seen as dual routes to the attainment of status and leadership.

"The research offers a situational and psychological explanation for when and why dominant leaders, including the present-day U.S. President Trump, are preferred over respected and admired candidates," says Dr Niro Sivanathan.

"While it might not always be consistently true that 'nice guys finish last', we maintain that certain communities when faced with the threat of uncertainty will prefer assertive over esteemed individuals as their leadership choice," says Mr. Hemant Kakkar.

Kakkar & Dr. Sivanathan tested their hypotheses in the U.S., employing statistical analysis of zip codes nested in each of the 50 states. When economic uncertainty in a particular zip code was counted in, Kakkar & Sivanathan observed that where there was increased financial insecurity, dominant leaders were preferred significantly more, while prestigious leaders were overtly less desirable.

They then replicated these findings, using objective macroeconomic indicators of [economic uncertainty](#) using World Bank Data, comprising of over 138,000 individuals, spanning 69 countries over a twenty year window.

With sections of the community alarmed by populism and struggling to comprehend what it all means ideologically, Sivanathan and Kakkar offer an alternative to the numerous political and personality-led characterisations.

"Guided by [evolutionary theory](#) for leadership emergence we set out to empirically examine the recent spate of global appeal for dominant leaders," says Dr Sivanathan. "Our central assertion is that the psychological threat imposed by one's environment increases the appeal of an external dominant agent who we believe is better capable of lessening these threats and the abiding sense that personal control that has been lost," says Mr. Hemant Kakkar.

Given certain conditions – economic stress; concerns about terrorism – people, Sivanathan and Kakkar contend, will typically prefer a leader who is perceived to be decisive, authoritative, and dominant, over a person who is respected, knowledgeable, admired, and permissive.

More information: Hemant Kakkar et al. When the appeal of a dominant leader is greater than a prestige leader, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2017). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1617711114](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1617711114)

Provided by London Business School

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