



The looks of a leader: Competent and trustworthy, but not dominant



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We explored the conditions under which trustworthiness would exert its influence.
- We examined the double edged sword nature of social dominance in social judgment.
- Trustworthiness predicted winning of elections but only when candidates looked competent.
- Dominance predicted winning of elections indirectly via competence.
- Dominance predicted losing of elections independent of competence.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is twofold: to uncover the conditions under which trustworthiness influences social judgment and to examine the possible double edged sword nature of social dominance in deciding social outcomes. In three studies, participants evaluated the personality traits of political candidates based on inferences from their faces. Perceptions of these traits were then used to predict actual election results and the subjective voting support of the participants. Trustworthiness increased the chances of winning actual elections, but only for those who were judged as competent. The expected double edged sword effect of dominance was found: on the one hand, dominance predicted winning of actual elections indirectly via competence; on the other hand, dominance predicted losing of elections directly once its positive association with competence was controlled. A different picture emerged with respect to the subjective voting support of the participants: all traits predicted the likelihood of winning.

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Perceived competence is considered one of the core dimensions in impression formation and the judgment of others (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2006; Judd, James-Hawkins, Yzerbyt, & Kashima, 2005; Wojciszke, 1994). Consequently, researchers have extensively examined the importance of perceived competence in predicting important social outcomes such as political elections (Castelli, Carraro, Ghitti, & Pastore, 2009; Poutvaara, Jordahl, & Berggren, 2009; Rule et al., 2010; Sussman, Petkova, & Todorov, 2013; Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, & Hall, 2005). In the present investigations, we explored whether perceived competence would moderate the influence of perceived trustworthiness on social outcomes. Although trustworthiness is considered a fundamental dimension of perception and judgment (Fiske et al., 2006; Judd et al., 2005; Wojciszke, 1994), evidence suggests that it is often unrelated to real life outcomes, such as political elections (Rule et al., 2010; Todorov et al., 2005) and company profits (Rule &

Ambady, 2008, 2011). It is possible that in contexts where competence is the primary concern, trustworthiness would matter only if the target possesses the necessary level of competence for the job. That is, competence may interact with trustworthiness in affecting social outcomes when competence is the explicit criterion. To the best of our knowledge, no empirical studies have tested this possible interaction effect. A major purpose of this paper is to fill in this gap by examining the moderating effect of competence on the relationship between trustworthiness and voters' decisions.

The second goal of this paper was to investigate the likely double edged sword role of social dominance in the perception and judgment of social targets. Social dominance is defined as a personality trait or a characteristic of an individual who behaves assertively or forcefully across multiple contexts (Buss & Craik, 1980; Gough, 1987; Stogdill, 1948; Wiggins, 1979). In the existing literature, the findings concerning the association between dominance and social outcomes are mixed. Social dominance may play a dual and contradictory role in the process of social judgment. On the one hand, dominance may lead to desirable social outcomes as a result of its positive connection with competence. On the other hand, dominance may result in negative consequences

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due to the threatening and aggressive image it can create. However, in previous studies, the influence of dominance is often confounded with the role of competence. Researchers tend to either combine dominance with competence as one index (e.g., Rule & Ambady, 2008, 2011) or examine only the predictive power of dominance (e.g., Mueller & Mazur, 1996; Rule et al., 2010) or the predictive power of competence alone (e.g., Todorov et al., 2005), but not the unique influence of both traits simultaneously on real life outcomes.¹ Dominance and competence, however, are related in a complex way. Therefore, failing to separate the two concepts can lead to conceptual ambiguity. Specifically, this approach would not allow us to reveal the possible opposing forces of social dominance, that is, its positive influence via competence and its detrimental consequences via aggression. Depending on which force (competence or aggression) is more salient, different results could emerge.

To address this methodological confound, we measured dominance and competence as two separate concepts in the current studies. This approach allowed us to accomplish three goals: First, it made it possible to examine the unique predictive power of dominance as well as the unique influence of competence in social judgment. Second, it made it feasible to test the two competing forces elicited by dominance simultaneously and thus to reveal the possible double sided nature of dominance. Specifically, we examined the unique impact of dominance, independent of competence, on the decisions made by perceivers. That is, we controlled for the benefits of dominance that are associated with perceived competence, in order to analyze whether dominance would lead to negative social outcomes, possibly due to perceived aggression and intimidation. Finally, the current approach made it possible to test the mediating role of competence in the relation of dominance to social outcome. Consequently, this strategy enabled us to help clarify the inconsistent findings regarding the influence of dominance on social perception and social judgment.

Trustworthiness, competence, and social influence

Trustworthiness forms the primary basis for an individual's general evaluation of others (Fiske et al., 2006; Judd et al., 2005; Wojciszke, 1994). Compared to competence and warmth, perceived trustworthiness is a more primary dimension in global impression formation (e.g., Brambilla, Rusconi, Sacchi, & Cherubini, 2011; Wojciszke, Bazinska, & Jaworski, 1998). Specifically, when forming impressions of a target, people are more interested in gathering information about traits related to trustworthiness (e.g., sincere, honest, trustworthy) than evidence related to other key interpersonal judgment domains such as competence and warmth (Brambilla et al., 2011). Moreover, studies have found that the valence of global impressions is influenced more strongly by trustworthiness than by competence (Wojciszke et al., 1998).

These results are consistent with the notion that trustworthiness has an evolutionary function. Specifically, perceived trustworthiness affects approach and avoidance responses to targets and reflects the valence of evaluation of others (Oosterhof & Todorov, 2008). For example, individuals tend to make judgments of trustworthiness automatically even when they only have a minimal amount of time to do so (e.g., Todorov, Pakrashi, & Oosterhof, 2009). The spontaneous evaluation of trustworthiness of others also bears behavioral consequences. For example, when playing social dilemma games, information about a partner's trustworthiness (i.e., helpfulness, honesty, trustworthiness) had a stronger influence on the participant's expectation of cooperation from the partner than information about a partner's intelligence (i.e., competence, practical skills) (De Bruin & Van Lange, 1999). As a result, participants were more cooperative toward moral partners than intelligent ones. Similarly, when playing behavioral games, participants were more willing to cooperate with partners who had trustworthy faces

than with those who had untrustworthy faces (e.g., Krumhuber et al., 2007; van 't Wout & Sanfey, 2008).

Trustworthiness-related traits are central to the assessment of political figures (Funk, 1996; Kinder, 1986; Pancer, Brown, & Barr, 1999) and leaders in general (Van Vugt, 2006). Research has found that trustworthiness is a valued trait for leaders around the world. Den Hartog and colleagues (Den Hartog, House, Hanges, Ruiz-Quintanilla, & Dorfman, 1999) highlighted the cross-cultural value placed on trustworthiness: "Contributing to outstanding leadership in all cultures were several attributes reflecting integrity. Thus, such a leader is trustworthy, just, and honest." (p. 237). Political campaigns and advertisements make great efforts to portray politicians as honest (Funk, 1996). Given these empirical findings, it is reasonable to expect that trustworthiness serves as an important basis for the overall evaluation of leaders. However, previous studies found no connection between perceived trustworthiness of candidates and actual electoral success in the U.S. (e.g., Rule et al., 2010²; Todorov et al., 2005), Italy (Castelli et al., 2009), and Finland³ (Poutvaara et al., 2009), or between the inferred trustworthiness of CEOs and their company profits (Rule & Ambady, 2008).

What explains these puzzling findings? It is possible that in situations where competence forms the normative basis for evaluation, such as the selection of public officeholders and company CEOs, competence may interact with trustworthiness to influence decisions about social outcomes. There is a consensus about the role of competence in the general evaluation of others and its effect on important social outcomes, such as political elections. Competence-related qualities are considered particularly task-relevant to the assessment of leadership abilities. For example, competence is an important predictor of global evaluations of political candidates (Kinder, 1986; Markus, 1982). Competence is a robust predictor, and often times the only predictor, of actual electoral outcomes (e.g., Todorov et al., 2005) and company profits (Rule & Ambady, 2008, 2011). These findings suggest that competence may be considered a normatively desirable and essential basis for leadership evaluations. If this is the case, being honest and sincere (i.e., trustworthiness) alone might not be sufficient to sway decision makers—only when potential leaders have already persuaded voters that they possess the competence to perform the job adequately, might trustworthiness-related traits give candidates an advantage.

Social dominance, competence, and social influence

Social dominance has been studied extensively in the judgment of social targets. However, the findings are somewhat mixed. On the one hand, dominance is often associated with leadership ability, strength, influence, and effectiveness (Leary, Cottrell, & Phillips, 2001). A meta-analysis found that, compared to all other personality characteristics, trait dominance was the most consistent predictor of leadership (Lord, De Vader, & Alliger, 1986). Moreover, compared to less dominant individuals, dominant individuals are more influential in face-to-face group settings because they are perceived as more competent (Anderson & Kilduff, 2009), they gain more control over group processes, and they are more persuasive in group decisions (for a review, see Judge, Bono, Ilies, & Gerhardt, 2002). Adopting a dominance strategy (i.e., the use of force and intimidation) can be as effective as adopting a prestige approach (i.e., the sharing of expertise or know-how to gain respect) in the attainment of social rank (Cheng, Tracy, & Henrich, 2010). For example, a recent study examined the impact of dominance on the formation of hierarchies within a group of previously unacquainted individuals. It was found that the dominant strategy was perceived as influential by both group members and outside observers. Dominance also had actual influence as assessed by a behavioral

¹ Although the Rule et al. (2010) study did include both competence and dominance (as measured by dominance and facial maturity) in trait ratings, competence was removed from the main analyses because it was correlated with dominance.

² In the Rule et al. (2010) paper, perceived warmth (characterized by likeability and trustworthiness) predicted actual election results in Japan, but not in the U.S.

³ In the Poutvaara et al. (2009) study, trustworthiness was related to the parliamentary electoral success of women candidates.

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