Presidential Personality and Performance

Scientific Inquiries
The basic question

- Fact #1: Presidents differ tremendously in personality
- Fact #2: Presidents vary greatly in their performance as leaders
- How are these two obvious facts related?
- Does the president’s personality predict his performance?
Two approaches

- Psychobiography and psychohistory – subjective, qualitative, single-case studies
- Historiometry – objective, quantitative, multiple-case studies
Historiometric: Two issues

- How to measure presidential performance?
- How to measure presidential personality?
Measuring performance

- **Objective measures**
  - e.g., veto behavior

- **Subjective assessments**
  - e.g., expert evaluations of performance
# Summary of 2009 Survey Results

## Top Ten Presidents
1. Lincoln (902)  
2. Washington (854)  
3. F.D. Roosevelt (837)  
4. T. Roosevelt (781)  
5. Truman (708)  
6. Kennedy (701)  
7. Jefferson (698)  
8. Eisenhower (689)  
9. Wilson (683)  
10. Reagan (671)

## Bottom Ten Presidents
33. Hayes (409)  
34. Hoover (389)  
35. Tyler (372)  
36. George W. Bush (362)  
37. Fillmore (351)  
38. Harding (327)  
39. W. H. Harrison (324)  
40. Pierce (287)  
41. A. Johnson (258)  
42. Buchanan (227)

Number in parentheses is total score (maximum 1000).
Measuring personality

- Content analysis
- Expert assessment
- Biographical analysis
Content analysis

- Extracting personality from documents, such as speeches and correspondence
- Illustration: Adaptation of the TAT
The Thematic Apperception Test (TAT)

- **Power motive** – Concern with impact, control or influence on others; with arousing strong emotions in others; with prestige
- **Achievement motive** – Concern with excellence, success in competition, or unique unprecedented accomplishment.
- **Affiliation motive** – Concern with friendship, love, or companionate activity; nurturance
Presidential Inaugural Addresses

- Power, Achievement, and Affiliation
  Motivation now calculated for all inaugurated presidents prior to Obama
- e.g., …
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Moreover, these scores correlate with various indicators of performance

E.g., …
Motivation and performance

- $n$ Power and $n$ Ach positively correlated

Foreign affairs:

- War: $n$ Power + →
  - war entry &
  - territorial gains

- Diplomacy:
  - $n$ Power - → peace accords
  - $n$ Aff + → peace accords
Motivation and performance

- **Administration:**
  - $n$ Power $\rightarrow$ Cabinet turnover (but competent)
  - $n$ Aff $\rightarrow$ friends & cronies $\rightarrow$ scandals

- **Legislation:** $n$ Power $\rightarrow$ veto use

- **Public relations:**
  - $n$ Power $\rightarrow$ press relations
  - $n$ Power $\rightarrow$ assassination attempts
Motivation & performance

- **Ideology**: Democrats > Republicans in $n$ Power
- **Election success**: matching of motive profiles
- **Historical greatness**:  
  - high $n$ Power & $n$ Ach  
  - low $n$ Aff
Expert Assessment

- Big Five Personality Factors
  - Neuroticism
  - Extraversion
  - Openness
  - Agreeableness
  - Conscientiousness
- 3 or more expert evaluations
- E.g., ...
Rubenzer, Faschingbauer, and Ones

Figure 1. Average $T$ scores of U.S. Presidents on Revised NEO Personality Inventory factors.
Figure 2. T scores of Washington on Revised NEO Personality Inventory factors.
Figure 3. T scores of Lincoln on Revised NEO Personality Inventory factors.
CHART 14.1
George W. Bush’s Scores on Character and the Big Five Traits

Percentile (U.S.)

Character  Neuroticism  Extraversion  Openness  Agreeableness  Conscientiousness

G.W. Bush  Avg. Pres.
Biographical analysis

- Simonton (1986-2006)
  - Creation of biographical sketches
  - Evaluation on various scales
  - Generation of 110 personality scores
  - Consolidation into 14 personality factors
"He was morally and physically courageous, even-tempered and conservative, secretive and sagacious, skeptical and cautious, truthful and honest, firm in his own convictions and tolerant of those of others, reflective and cool, ambitious and somewhat selfish, kind to all and good-natured, sympathetic in the presence of suffering or under an imaginative description of it, lived in his reason and reasoned in his life. Easy of approach and perfectly democratic in his nature, [he] had a broad charity for his fellow man and had an excuse for unreflective acts of his kind, and in short he loved justice and lived out in thought and act the eternal right. ... I do not say that he never deviated from his own nature and his own rules. His nature, the tendency of it, is as I state. [He] struggled to live the best life possible. This I know."
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110 Adjectives → 14 Factors

- Moderation
- Friendliness
- Intellectual brilliance
- Machiavellianism
- Poise and polish
- Achievement drive
- Forcefulness

- Wit
- Physical attractiveness
- Pettiness
- Tidiness
- Conservatism
- Inflexibility
- Pacificism
Factor 3: Intellectual Brilliance

Positive loadings. Interests wide (.85), Artistic (.84), Inventive (.76), Curious (.74), Intelligent (.64), Sophisticated (.62), Complicated (.61), Insightful (.54), Wise (.46), Idealistic (.43).

Negative loadings. Dull (−.71), Commonplace (−.41).
Figure 1. Dendrogram from hierarchical cluster analysis of the 39 presidents according to the 16 personality factors.
Personality and biography

- Large families positively related to Moderation, Poise and polish, but negatively related to Inflexibility and Forcefulness
- Professors score high on Inflexibility
Personality and performance

- Intellectual brilliance positively related to greatness but negatively related to electoral success
- Legislative success positively related to Machiavellianism, Forcefulness, Moderation, Poise and polish, and negatively related to Inflexibility
- Inflexibility and veto power (contingent on context)
- Controversiality positively related to Achievement drive, Forcefulness, Pettiness, and Inflexibility but negatively to Moderation, Friendliness, and Wit
Presidential style study

- Same biographical sketches, but
- New raters
- Different items
  - all having to do with leadership style
Interpersonal
Gives credit to others for work done
Endears himself to staff through courtesy and consideration
Willing to make compromises
Is not impatient or abrupt in conferences

Charismatic
Enjoys the ceremonial aspects of the office
Has a flair for the dramatic
Uses rhetoric effectively
Is a dynamo of energy and determination
Keeps in contact with the American public and its moods
Rarely shy or awkward in public

Deliberative
Able to visualize alternatives and weigh long-term consequences
Keeps himself thoroughly informed
Cautious and conservative in action
Avoids emotional outbursts

→ Millard Fillmore
→ George Washington
→ Gerald Ford

→ Franklin Roosevelt
→ Andrew Jackson
→ Lyndon Johnson
→ John Kennedy
→ Theodore Roosevelt
→ Ronald Reagan

→ Millard Fillmore
→ George Washington
→ James Madison

George Washington
Gerald Ford
Ronald Reagan
Creative
Initiates new legislation and programs
Innovative in his role as an executive
Rarely a middle-of-the-roader

→ Andrew Jackson
→ Thomas Jefferson
→ Franklin Roosevelt
→ Richard Nixon

Franklin Roosevelt

Neurotic
Places political success over effective policy
Suffers health problems during difficult and critical periods in office
Avoids the direct, uncomplicated approach

→ James Polk
→ Ulysses Grant
→ Martin Van Buren
→ Lyndon Johnson

Lyndon Johnson
Leader style and personality

- **Interpersonal** –
  - positive correlations with Moderation, Friendliness, Physical attractiveness, Conservatism, and Pacifism
  - but
  - negative correlations with Machiavellianism, Forcefulness, Pettiness, and Inflexibility
Personality and style

- Charismatic –
  - positive correlations with Intellectual brilliance, Machiavellianism, Achievement drive, Forcefulness
  - but
  - negative correlations with Moderation and Conservatism
Personality and style

- Deliberative –
  - positive correlations with Moderation, Poise and polish, Tidiness, and Pacificism
  - but
  - negative correlations with Forcefulness and Inflexibility
Personality and style

- Creative –
  - positive correlations with Intellectual brilliance, Machiavellianism, Achievement drive, Forcefulness, and Inflexibility
  - but
  - negative correlations with Moderation, Conservatism, and Pacificism
Personality and style

- Neurotic –
  - positive correlations with Machiavellianism and Pettiness
Style and biography

- Presidents from large families higher on Interpersonal and Deliberation dimensions, lower on Creativity
- Orphanhood positively associated with Charisma
Charisma and Creativity both positively associated with legislative success but also with assassination attempts

Charisma and Creativity positively associated with greatness
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Historical greatness predictors

- Intellectual brilliance
- Administration scandal
- War hero
- Years in office
- Years of war
- Assassination
Conclusion

- Context > personality
- but many contextual factors have a partial personality basis, especially
  - Administration scandal
  - Assassination
- and some personality traits interact with contextual factors: e.g., Inflexibility
- Upshot: Personality is relevant to performance