

Can we predict the success of a president? – Thoughts of a young Swiss scholar

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What lies inside of the head of the new president of the United States Donald Trump? Many are asking themselves the same question: What kind of leader will he be? What kind of decisions will he take?



Maybe less of a legal entry, this is more of a “nice-to-know” analysis I would like to share with our readers. Constitutional Law has a lot to do with political science and at the same time political science, and hence constitutional law, have a lot in common with psychology and the studies of personality, especially *psychometrics*.¹ So yes, if one really feels the urge to find a link between the main ground of this blog and what I’m about to share, I can say, it is definitely not far-fetched. The passion for American politics and, even more, of the interdisciplinary manner to perceive specific topics pushes me towards writing about something I rarely portrait in my

¹ *The psychological theory or technique of mental measurement: Definition of psychometrics* in the Merriam Webster Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/psychometrics> (07.02.2017).

job, yet it is of central importance even for lawyers: *human behavior*.

I recently stumbled upon a captivating study by psychologists Steven RUBENZER and Thomas FASCHINGBAUER. Their book, called *Personality, Character, and Leadership In The White House: Psychologists Assess the Presidents*,² truthfully presents scientific personality evaluations of the American presidents. This work tries to classify presidents and allows predicting their performance in power, or as they call it in the book: presidential success.

I’ve enjoyed the research for content for this fascinating and illuminating interdisciplinary topic. However, I must admit, my legal instincts kept coming to surface and in order to

² Rubenzer, Steven J. *Personality, Character, and Leadership In The White House: Psychologists Assess the Presidents*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004.

make sense of this entry I could not ignore them any longer. Being “successful” as a president is a definition in need of interpretation. What do the psychologist mean by being a successful president? How do you measure it? Thankfully, they give an answer to the definition of success almost at the commencement of the book. ‘When companies want to measure job performance of employees in regular jobs, they often rely on ratings by supervisors. To date, presidential job performance, despite intense public scrutiny of the job and its incumbents, has not been studied using detailed job-performance ratings. For most other jobs in the economy, scientifically sound rating forms have been developed that give examples of good and bad performance on the job. A good secretary, for example, should type quickly with accuracy, be friendly and courteous to coworkers and clients, and order new supplies before old ones run out. A bad secretary comes in late, talks on the phone to her boyfriend during working hours, and, in one infamous case caught on video, urinates on her boss’s chair. We can create an overall rating of a secretary’s value as an employee by summing up ratings on “good” items (“types accurately”) and subtracting the ratings on “bad” items (“pees on my chair”), so the authors start to explain. But how to do this specifically? For the study, the authors developed a job-performance rating form based on a list of items. So, the resultant form has forty-one items measuring specific and general job-performance aspects of the presidency. Among these, the following items were to be found in the form: Role as Chief of State, Role as Legislative Leader, Role as Guardian of Prosperity, Role as Party Leader, Role as International Leader, Establishment of responsibilities & procedures, Supervision of subordinates, Concern for the country, Addressing the country’s problems, Transcending party politics for the good of the nation, providing moral leadership, productivity, Quality of work performed, problem solving, commitment to the job, initiative, cooperation with others, and many more. Ten experts (scholars knowledgeable about the presidents as a group) were then invited to rate each president on the forty-one job-performance items from 1 to 5. The total score for each president was called the measure of *overall job performance*. Selecting specific items the forty one the authors created a second dimension, which included the aspects: Self-discipline, Avoiding vices at work, Compliance

with the Constitution and the laws, Compliance with rules and procedures, Avoiding exploitation of other nations or groups of people and avoiding unethical behavior. This factor was tagged as: *Ethics on the Job*. Both the *overall job performance* and *ethics on the job* reflected the presidential success of a president. The most highly rated presidents were Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1933-1945), Abraham Lincoln (1861-1865), and George Washington (1789-1797). The lowest were Warren Harding (1921-1923), Franklin Pierce (1853-1857), and Ulysses Grant (1869-1877). Of course this, as any other measurement instrument, remains a relative chart. Hardly can one say that measuring success differently does not culminate in a different result. After reading the book, however, I can tell that this one is pretty accurate. Personal sensation. The authors acknowledge this: ‘It is very hard to tease apart different aspects of an employee’s performance on the job. Bosses tend to give high marks in all categories to workers they like, and low marks across the board to those they do not. Sometimes called the halo effect, it operates just as strongly when historians rate presidents on different categories of performance’.³ So, of course, it’s a matter of perspective. This was just a summary of the authors chapter to briefly explain what is meant with the definition of “presidential success”. At least we know it involves performance and ethics, so don’t be shocked if the analysis shows us that a specific president, which would seem to have made very bad and unethical decisions can still be seen as quite successful, or “high-performing”, for want of a better word. Adolf Hitler, for instance, in the implementation of his policies and the political results achieved can be seen as quite performing, yet strongly unethical and thus only partially “successful” as a leader.

The authors asked 120 experts, including biographers, historians, presidential advisers, and other well-informed sources, to rate the presidents by filling out standardized personality tests (incl. questionnaires about character, intelligence and behavior). From the results, the authors identify traits related to presidential success, examine how the presidents’ personalities affected their job performance, and list their scores on the major di-

³ pp. 38-59.

mensions of personality.⁴ In order to understand how a president might behave in the future one has to scrutinize the past. Psychological and personality models created by RUBENZER and FASCHINGBAUER can, in fact, be applied to historical figures through what they wrote or what people wrote about them. And that's exactly what they did. Several were the types of presidents they came up with:⁵

- **Dominators:** Like Richard Nixon (1969-1974), Lyndon Johnson (1963-1969) and Andrew Johnson (1829-1837). Their personalities were as strong as their impact on the political scene. Apparently all very unpleasant and low on openness. They were exceptionally 'bossy, demanding, domineering, manipulative;' none was even-tempered. All acted assertively, were egocentric, hardheaded, and thought highly of themselves (narcissistic).⁶ They were seen as less willing to cooperate and as presidents tend to be "average" presidents.
- **Good guys:** Like Gerald Ford (1974-1977) and Dwight Eisenhower (1953-1961), but also Hayes, Taylor, Tyler, Fillmore, Cleveland and Washington (although Washington is a special case due to his incomparability with other presidents). In the book they are considered as conscientious, diligent and open to novel experiences. 'As presidents, both clearly relied on a staff system, deciding among options formulated by advisers. They kept their staffs informed on matters concerning other departments, emphasized teamwork, and knew their own limitations'.⁷ They are able to foresee the long-term consequences of their actions. They also tend to be "average" presidents.
- **Actors:** Obviously like Ronald Reagan (1981-1989), but also Warren Harding (1921-1923). The book reveals the follow-

ing concerning this type of presidents: 'Warren Harding is generally regarded as the least successful of all presidents in both his job performance and his intellect. He seemed overwhelmed by the job. Though not prominent, he is interesting, like Grant, as an ineffective president. Ronald Reagan, though similar to Harding in personality, has a different reputation. [...] He seemingly did not attend to details but was a master of political themes. A professional actor, he also understood how to articulate them effectively. Harding and Reagan shared a number of personality traits. [...] The] experts perceived them both as "shallow, nonintellectual, unreflective," although Harding was much more so. Both saw themselves as unusually lighthearted, they did not overcontrol their needs and impulses, and were not thin-skinned or overly sensitive. Their feelings showed on their faces and through body language. As presidents, both encouraged the independence of their aides, often with unhappy results'.⁸

- **Philosophes:** Like Abraham Lincoln (1861-1865), Thomas Jefferson (1801-1809) or Jimmy Carter (1977-1981). They all have high values of openness towards novel experiences and self-esteem. They are curious, interested in science, and also pleasant. They result in being the most successful presidents. 'Each was emotionally moved by art, yet understood advanced mathematics and was interested in science'.⁹
- **Extraverts:** They tend to be the most successful presidents after the *philosophes*. Three examples are John Kennedy (1961-1963), Bill Clinton (1993-2001) but also Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1933-1945). High scores in extroversion, yet less pleasant and conscious than the *philosophes*. 'All the men profiled in this chapter are, or were at one time, considered to be in the first ranks of the nation's leaders. Kennedy's reputation has declined in recent years as disclosures about his reckless sexual behavior have continued to leak out. The perspective of time has removed some of the glimmer of

⁴ Visit www.testingthepresidents.com and www.PersonalityinHistory.com for more information.

⁵ Rubenzer, Steven J. *Personality, Character, and Leadership In The White House: Psychologists Assess the Presidents*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004, pp. 60-76.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 83-117.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 137-157.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 167-184.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 206-234.

Camelot, and the martyrdom of assassination has paled as the programs he helped sponsor are taken for granted. The other two Extraverts we profiled did not share Kennedy's sexual adventurism [not sure], but they did have many common traits. All were enthusiastic and happy (positive emotions) and liked being around people (gregariousness). They were drawn to thrills and adventure (excitement seeking) and valued a wide range of emotions (openness to feelings). All three were willing to use indirect means or deceit to influence others (low straightforwardness) and scored high on charisma. As presidents, they found dealing with the press challenging and enjoyable, shared a flair for the dramatic, were charismatic, and carefully crafted their public images. None was shy or awkward in public, and all viewed the presidency as a vehicle of self-expression'.¹⁰

- **Introverts:** Like John Adams (1797-1801) and Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921). 'Both were famously difficult person. Adams driven for achievement and recognition, Wilson in the service of his ideals. As presidents, both scored low on the Interpersonal style of governing and dramatically failed to appreciate their own limitations'.¹¹
- **Maintainers:** Just like William McKinley (1897-1901), G. H. W. Bush (1989-1993), Gerald Ford (1974-1977), and Harry Truman (1945-1953). Three of these men followed a more prominent president, and McKinley preceded one. They have little openness towards novel experiences, yet they are focused on work and scarce in creativity. 'Each was easily identified as traditional in his moral tenets'. They result in moderately successful presidents, because great workers and skilled negotiators.¹²

Aubrey IMMELMANN, psychologist at the Saint John's University (Minnesota, USA) says that **Barack Obama** (2009-2017) could be the first of a kind: the **conciliator**. A president, who is always trying to find a solution while avoiding conflict. He is a true rarity: a person with

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 235-267.

¹¹ pp. 118-136.

¹² pp. 185-205.

astonishing charisma and with a continuous desire to find common ground with the others.¹³

Both psychologists found out that the personality of a president is very different from the one of a normal American citizen. They tend to be less balanced than the average, very self-confident, and workaholics. Still, they are very different from each other. Often, if we look back in time, to a cautious president a more instinctive one has followed, to a brilliant or extroverted a more introverted. All in all, Americans have always liked to chance, election after election. Even more interesting, RUBENZER says that among the things they have discovered there is this: some traits about the character of a person can predict the success of a president.

Hitherto, not only positive traits are required: You also need to be a **good liar**, says RUBENZER. Even Lincoln, considered to be the absolute best president of all times, apparently has many times manipulated the truth and moved his beliefs in order to succeed in what he needed to do, like when he softened his opposition to slavery.

Another characteristic, which is not seen as positive, yet often crucial to be successful: **narcissism**. "Great narcissism" wants a president to be an exhibitionist, to seek for attention and to negate his own weaknesses. Among the narcissist presidents we can count Kennedy, Nixon and Clinton, but also both Roosevelt, which are also seen by many historians as the best presidents.

So, to make things brief, where do we put Trump in all this? On the one hand, as a liar, Donald Trump is a champ. Some analysts have fact-screened Trump's assertions made during the elections: 2% were true, 7% almost true and 15% half-true. Well, that makes two thirds of his statements false. Hillary Clinton's false statements instead rounded up to less than a third. This, however, should not sound absurd. RUBENZER states that the ability to lie raises the probabilities of a president to implement his policies. This would at least make

¹³ Immelman, A. (2008, July). The political personality of U.S. president Barack Obama. Paper presented at the 33rd Annual Scientific Meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology, San Francisco, CA, July 7-10, 2010. Retrieved from Digital Commons website: http://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/psychology_public/25/

sense to me.

On the other hand, narcissism is one of the most pronounced traits in Donald Trump's personality. We saw it can be an element of success. But be careful, narcissism is a double-edged weapon (just like lying): thinking highly of oneself makes presidents strong at the negotiation table (maybe at an international table concerning military actions or radical economic strategies), yet tend to raise the chance of *impeachment*¹⁴ or unfit behaviors (like Clinton and the Lewinsky affair).¹⁵

Dr. Kevin DUTTON, of the University of Oxford, has summarized the typical traits of a leader: courage, self-confidence, cool-headedness, egocentricity, dishonesty, charisma, ruthlessness and lack of empathy and conscience.¹⁶

RUBENZER confirms Trump's high scores in both the positive and the negative traits. He wouldn't be the first: Clinton and Kennedy were both cut from the same cloth. Just like Trump, Churchill and Saint Paul hit these traits, too, but also Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein. Completing this list is Andrew Jackson, which apparently resembles the most to Donald Trump. Hence, *extraverted dominators*: all birds of a feather.

Andrew Jackson was the first non-aristocratic president. He had a very irascible temperament and was very firm. He wasn't interested in nature, science or the human condition. Everything to him was either true or false and the people he had to work with often disgusted him. Yet, his personality was irresistible to his followers, and even if he seemed rude with

others, he was gentle with his family. The links with Trump's personality are numerous. Jackson is still, as of today, remembered as the president who managed to maintain the nation united, despite the Southern States seeking for secession. Union achieved, however, under the deportation of thousands of Native Americans to Oklahoma, which resulted in ca. 4000 deaths.

The direction, which Trump's action will take, depends on the mixed historical fortunes, which he will have to face. Fact remains: The personality of a public figure such as a president, a legislator in the Swiss parliament or even the main traits of the "personality of the people" (Volk), can have an influence even on the Constitutional Law of a country.

¹⁴ *A charge of misconduct made against the holder of a public office*: Definition of *Impeachment* in the Oxford Dictionaries, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/impeachment> (08.02.2017).

¹⁵ Only two presidents have faced an impeachment trial, both of them Democrats and both of them acquitted. The first was Andrew Johnson, who in 1868 was acquitted by one vote of violating the previous year's Tenure of Office Act. The second was Bill Clinton, who in 1998 was acquitted by a much larger margin of perjury and obstructing justice in relation to the Monica Lewinsky scandal. But only one president, Republican Richard Nixon, has ever resigned, and that was to avoid inevitable impeachment for corruption in relation to the Watergate scandal. Nixon was granted an unconditional pardon by his successor Gerald Ford.

¹⁶ Presidential candidates may be psychopaths – but that could be a good thing, <http://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2016-08-23-presidential-candidates-may-be-psychopaths---could-be-good-thing> (08.02.2017).