

Politicians' uniquely simple personalities

The complexity of human personality has been reduced to five dimensions, based on factor analyses of judgements of personality traits¹. Many researchers agree that a five-factor model of personality captures the essential features of all traits that are used to describe personality: energy/extroversion; agreeableness/friendliness; conscientiousness; emotional stability against neuroticism; and intellect/openness to experience²⁻⁴. But we show here that this common, standard set of five factors does not hold for judgements of famous political figures.

We found that, when people judge the personality traits of politicians, they use only two or three factors. Personality factors that are normally independent — such as energy and openness — were highly correlated in a more simplified view of personality.

Political candidates gain intense media exposure over an extended period of self-promotion designed to portray them as trustworthy experts with many admirable personality traits⁵. Such public exposure is intended to lead to clearly articulated perceptions rather than stereotypical evaluations by the electorate⁶.

The nature of campaign information is unique as a basis for forming impressions of personality, as it is packaged by supporters and opponents as pros and cons (favourable or condemning) designed to simplify the ultimately dichotomous decision of how to vote. The selective mental processing and filtering by the electorate of the mass of discrepant input about political candidates must in the end justify each per-

son's one vote: be it for or against. Therefore, we predicted that personality judgements about political candidates would likewise be constricted to involve a limited number of factors rather than the usual five.

We first studied the personality judgements of a sample of 2,088 Italian adults, of diverse ages, education and political views. Leading party politicians were evaluated by 1,257 respondents, and another 831 evaluated their own personalities and those of several celebrities. Judgements were made from a list of 25 adjectives that are markers of the five-factor model. Each adjective (for example, enterprising, reliable, truthful) was rated on how characteristic it was of each target on a seven-point scale, and those ratings were factor-analysed⁷. The analysis reduces the scores to a minimal number of correlated groups of traits within factors that are independent of each other.

Ratings were made of two Italian political candidates (Silvio Berlusconi and Roman Prodi), an international celebrity (skiing hero Alberto Tomba) and a famous Italian television personality (Pippo Baudo).

Table 1 reveals three clear results: (1) respondents' personality portraits of themselves require the five-factor solution, as found in earlier research; (2) personality judgements of national celebrities also require five factors; but (3) personality judgements of political candidates are drastically reduced to only two factors, despite many significant differences between their personalities.

The first of the two stable⁸ personality factors for politicians has been named energy/innovation (which is a blend of energy and openness), and the second factor is honesty/trustworthiness (a blend of agreeableness, conscientiousness and stability).

These findings can be applied more generally, as shown by our replication study with 195 US college students. These students rated their own personalities after having rated Democratic President Bill Clinton and Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole, along with basketball star 'Magic' Johnson. The same 25 five-factor model marker adjectives were used as in our Italian study.

Table 1 shows that this different sample replicates the basic factor patterns found in the larger Italian sample: self-ratings and the ratings of the popular basketball player (among basketball fans) use all five factors, but judgements of the politicians are restricted to only three factors (among potential voters).

Finally, the percentage of total variance explained by each factor solution (2, 3 or 5) for each target personality, for both samples, is a high, nearly identical, average of 60 per cent.

We conclude that, by adopting a simplifying method of judging political candidates' personalities, voters use a cognitively efficient strategy for coding the mass of complex data, thus combating informational overload⁹. Doing so helps them to decide how to cast their vote.

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Table 1 Factor composition for target personalities

	Factors					Variance explained (%)
	1	2	3	4	5	
Italian sample						
Self (<i>n</i> = 827)	E	O	A	C	S	56
Athlete (<i>n</i> = 829)	A	E	O	O	S	57
TV star (<i>n</i> = 830)	C	E	S	O	A	60
Politicians						
Berlusconi (<i>n</i> = 1,257)	A + C + S	E + O	—	—	—	61
Prodi (<i>n</i> = 643)	A + C + S	E + O	—	—	—	64
US sample						
Self (<i>n</i> = 195)	A	C	E	O	S	57
Athlete (<i>n</i> = 81)	S	C	O	A	E	61
Politicians						
Clinton (<i>n</i> = 127)	E + O	C + A	?	—	—	57
Dole (<i>n</i> = 127)	C + A	?	E + O	—	—	62

Factors 1-5 are arranged in order of the amount of variance in ratings, with Factor 1 explaining the most variance and Factor 5 the least. E, energy; O, openness; A, agreeableness; C, conscientiousness; S, emotional stability; and '?', an uninterpretable factor. Adjectives used to describe the politicians' two factors, normally attributed to the factors shown in parentheses, are — energy/innovation: enterprising (E), active (E), self-assured (E), energetic (E), cheerful (E), innovative (O), creative (O), inventive (O), smart (O), modern (O), efficient (C), optimistic (S), confident (S), cordial (A); and honesty/trustworthiness: sincere (A), truthful (A), loyal (A), responsible (C), reliable (C), precise (C), persistent (C), poised (S), peaceful (S), stable (S), generous (A).

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