1-28-2019

The US Government Shutdown: When Is Personality Shut Out?

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Recommended Citation

Editor (2019) "The US Government Shutdown: When Is Personality Shut Out?," International Bulletin of Political Psychology: Vol. 19 : Iss. 1 , Article 4. Available at: https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol19/iss1/4

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As of this writing (January 26, 2019), the partial shutdown of the US Government is shut down. Without taking a stance on political sides, close readings of mass media quickly yield a common motif. The US President, more specifically his personality, has been the driver of the shutdown and the shutdown of the shutdown. The motif includes many personality descriptors, mostly unflattering—e.g., narcissism, grandiosity, disagreeableness, extroversion, immaturity, volatility, craveness, arrogance, introspective opaqueness, being closed to disconfirming information and analysis, inauthentic. As well, there has been speculation on unconscious psychodynamic conflicts—e.g., fear of losing control, fear of being contaminated—driving behavior which, in turn, elicit the above personality descriptors. In a non-partisan manner, how might one contemplate the significance of the President’s personality—correctly outlined or not—in the political world including that surrounding the shutdown? When might it matter, and when not?

In writings on political psychology, the Holy Grail might be the late Fred Greenstein’s *Personality and Politics: Problems of Evidence, Inference, and Conceptualization* and its parsing through Jerrold Post’s *Leaders and Their Followers in a Dangerous World: The Psychology of Political Behavior*. As to the shutdown, personality rises in its import to the degree that (1) the situation is ambiguous with incomplete, contradictory information, even too much undifferentiated information; (2) one has no preconceived and normative thought matrix to handle information and possible options; (3) there appear to be few and also less significant sanctions for one’s preferred options; (4) personality proclivities and predispositions lead one to a very different perspective than one what most other people think; (5) one is less bound within a group decisionmaking process; (6) one feels less bound or obligate to follow the lead of others; (7) one is more emotionally involved in the political issue; (8) one puts more effort into resolving the political issue; (9) one acts more on impulse as opposed to contemplation; and (10) one feels more free of obligations to act in a specific manner. More specifically to the elements of unconscious psychodynamic conflict, personality becomes more significant to the degree that (1) aspects of the political situation in some way mirror aspects of the unconscious conflict; (2) the conflict(s) are more intense; and (3) there’s a congruence of certain behavioral options with satisfaction of unconscious needs related to conflict.

Yet, in the aftermath of the shutdown of the shutdown, analyses of what happened largely address rational and logical calculations as to what is actually required for border security; how various kinds of a “wall” meet these requirements; what suffices to be a “wall”; what should serve as legal and illegal immigration policies; implications for the success of the Trump Presidency, a Trump re-election campaign; even the “political chops” of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Too often, however, one’s irrational and illogical elements of personality—irrational and illogical in that the elements do not
directly conform to the objective requirements of the political issue—serve as a smoking gun for victory, defeat, and the yet-to-be-determined.


Keywords: Conflict. Personality. Political. Psychology. Trump. Unconscious.

Abstract/Description: This article identifies factors influencing how significant a leader’s personality affects political decision making and behavior.

Disciplines: Other Psychology, Philosophy, Philosophy of Science. Political Science, Other Political Science, Psychology, Defense and Security Studies, International Relations

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