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Trends. Where's the Person in Personality? The Personality of Politicians.

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

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Title: Trends. Where's the Person in Personality? The Personality of Politicians.

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses whether personality assessments of politicians can be practically relevant for members of the body politic.

In a time of war and war-related propaganda, the personalities of politicians are hot topics in public discourse. Whether idealized, demonized, or discounted, politicians are more often attributed significance than insignificance in affairs of state by the general public.

So what can be said about the personality of politicians based on political psychological research? As but one example--an example that reflects a very common methodological approach--Caprara et al. (2003) have published an analysis of personality assessments of Italian politicians as contrasted with a normative sample from the Italian population. Statistically significant results support the hypotheses that politicians score higher on three of the five personality constructs that make up a comprehensive theory of human personality; that politicians from rival coalitions differ on several personality dimensions; that center-right politicians are higher than center-left in two constructs; that center-left politicians are higher in one construct than center-left voters; and that center-right politicians are higher than voters in two constructs.

With Caprara et al.'s data, one might make inferences about the nature of politicians, their congruence and incongruence with the voting and non-voting publics, and so on. Very soon, however, one would be confronted with some basic questions about methodology and interpretation. How meaningful are the personality constructs in question to the political matters actually touching the body politic? Can such constructs have meaning out of specific socio-historical contexts? Can such constructs be behind political behavior without identifying the personal meanings of various political challenges for the politician in question? And given the explanatory variance for behavior that traditionally is attributed to personality constructs even optimally crafted through personality inventories, why should such research matter?

Will even a war environment be salient enough to induce the motivation for resolving psychology's meaning problem?

(See Caprara, G., Barbaranelli, C., Consiglio, C., Picconi, L., & Zimbardo, P.G. (2003). Personalities of politicians and voters: Unique and synergistic relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, 849-856; Cowden, J.A. (1999). Self-effacing and self-defeating leadership: Adlai E. Stevenson. *Political Psychology*, 20, 845-874; Miliora, M.T. (1998). JFK: A narcissistic political leader. *Psychohistory Review*, 27, 19-36; Renshon, S.A. (1998). Analyzing the psychology and performance of presidential candidates at a distance: Bob Dole and the 1996 presidential campaign. *Leadership Quarterly*, 9, 377-395.) (Keywords: Personality, Politicians, Public Discourse.)