

President Biden's personality characteristics and his success as US President: a brief analysis

Abstract

The current article reviews two studies of President Biden's personality, one conducted just before and the other following his election to the Presidency in November 2020. Both studies utilized *at-a-distance* assessment methods involving expert raters who completed standardized personality inventories based on reviewing President Biden's public persona. Both studies suggested that President Biden possesses prosocial traits, including a high level of extraversion and a moderately high level of agreeableness, enabling him to be a "healer-in-chief." Yet, despite the prosocial traits emphasized in both studies, President Biden has had low approval ratings by the American public, and most Americans, including Democrats, do not want him to run for re-election. However, public opinion polls do not necessarily reflect a president's performance, and it may be premature to conclude whether President Biden has had a successful presidency. In this article, President Biden's personality qualities will be discussed briefly in connection with a study of 41 US presidents that focused partly on associations between presidential personality and presidential greatness or success. President Biden's "conciliatory extravert" personality style, in conjunction with his modest levels of ambition and dominance, might not be consistent with the particularly high levels of assertiveness and achievement-striving historically characteristic of "great" presidents. This may help explain in part why most Americans have, at the present time, not perceived President Biden as a very popular or successful president. Ultimately, historians will form judgments in the future about his presidency.

Keywords: personality style, independents, unemployment, interpersonal qualities

Volume 14 Issue 6 - 2023

Robert Semel

Licensed psychologist in Independent Practice, USA

Correspondence: Robert Semel, Licensed psychologist in Independent Practice, USA, Email robertsemelpsy@gmail.com

Received: October 25, 2023 | **Published:** November 8, 2023

Introduction

Various mental health professionals predicted in 2020 and 2021 that President Joe Biden's personality characteristics would facilitate a leadership style that would help unify the nation.¹⁻³ Yet, at two and one-half years into his presidency, President Biden has consistently low approval ratings, including on key issues such as the economy, and more specifically, inflation, higher interest rates, higher gas prices; immigration and border security; crime and public safety; foreign policy and national security. A Washington Post-ABC News poll taken September 15-20, 2023, found that more than 3 in 5 Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents indicated they would prefer a nominee other than President Biden.⁴ Biden's overall approval stood at 37 percent, whereas 56 percent of Americans disapproved of the president. The October 2023 Investor's Business Daily/TechnoMetrica Institute of Policy and Politics (IBD/TIPP) Presidential Leadership Index of 39 for President Biden was the lowest level since President Trump's first year in office.⁵ The Presidential Leadership Index combines survey readings on how American adults feel about Biden's personal qualities, presidential performance, and leadership attributes. Most voters, even within the Democrat party, do not want him to run for re-election, albeit most Democrats surveyed in the IBD/TIPP Poll approve of his job performance. Another recent poll found that three-quarters of Americans, including two-thirds of Democrats, think Biden is too old for office.⁶

It has been stated that polls and public opinion surveys during a president's term in office are not ideal measures of job performance.⁷ However, approval ratings are included among metrics of presidential performance, along with other metrics such as job growth, GDP growth, stock market performance, unemployment, the nation's involvement in wars, and international peace or conflicts. Presidential job approval polls are also historically related to reelection in the US.⁸

It should be recognized that even accurate assessments of a president's personality might not accurately predict a president's performance in office. Certain events in domestic and foreign affairs are outside the control of any US president. Also, a president can vigorously campaign for legislation to enact his or her policies; however, legislation might not pass through Congress, it might be substantially modified before it will pass in both houses of Congress, or, as in the case of President Biden's student loan forgiveness program, might be ruled unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court. Additionally, US presidential history provides several examples, e.g., Harry S. Truman, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter, in which a president was popular, at least on some issues of importance to Americans, yet had low average approval ratings.⁹

Nevertheless, to the extent that analyses of president's personalities by mental health experts have been used to make predictions about president's leadership styles, e.g., that Biden would be "a uniter, not a divider,"² and a "healer-in-chief, it is appropriate to examine how such predictions have been realized thus far in his presidential term. The following section will briefly examine two published studies of President Biden's personality qualities and anticipated leadership styles. Subsequently, President Biden's personality qualities will be discussed in connection with a study of 41 US presidents that focused partly on associations between presidential personality and presidential greatness or success.⁷ This may help explain in part why most Americans have, at present, not perceived President Biden as a very popular or successful president.

Studies of President Biden's personality characteristics and anticipated leadership style

Book et al.,¹ studied President Trump's and then-Vice-President Biden's personality using expert raters who used *at-a-distance* methods to complete the HEXACO personality inventory for Trump

and Biden based on their public personas. This was a follow-up study to Visser et al.,¹⁰ which studied the personalities of Trump and Hillary Clinton in 2016. It is unclear from the study by Book et al. what public persona material was utilized as rating sources, whether raters utilized any of the same sources, and whether sources included positive and negative material for both Trump and Biden. This leaves the potential for a greater risk of bias. Also, 11 of the 18 raters indicated their political positions as left of center, two as center, and five did not state their political positions. Thus, most raters had political positions that were left of center. It is possible that liberal raters unintentionally selected more positive material for Biden and did not seek to find positive material for Trump.

Overall, the study by Book et al.,¹ suggested that Biden appears to be an average person with a high level of extraversion and relatively high prosocial traits, including Agreeableness and Conscientiousness. The overall Honesty-Humility domain rating was average for Biden, including a high Fairness rating. However, Biden's rating was low on the Sincerity facet, slightly higher than Trump's, and was the lowest of all his positive traits across all HEXACO domains. The Sincerity facet of the Honesty-Humility domain measures a person's willingness to be manipulative and disingenuous with others to achieve a desired outcome. Biden's low Sincerity rating might not be a liability, though, as will be discussed later; nevertheless, the significance of this is unclear regarding President Biden's performance in office.

A study by Griebe and Immelman² aimed to utilize an "Empirically-based personological framework for inferring Biden's major personal strengths and limitations and anticipating his likely leadership style as president." At-a-distance ratings of Mr. Biden's personality on the Millon Inventory of Diagnostic Criteria¹¹ were reported to be based on a wide array of 400 biographical sources and media reports. The results were all within normal limits. Biden's primary personality pattern was consistent with the Outgoing/gregarious pattern, with a secondary Accommodating/cooperative pattern and lower characteristics on the Ambitious/confident pattern. The overall personality configuration was consistent with the *conciliatory extravert* subtype, referred to also as an *appeasing extravert* subtype. Persons with this subtype tend to have a strong affiliation motive; they are driven to seek approval and attempt to smooth things over when encountering disagreements or conflicts. Persons with the Outgoing personality pattern might be adept at using their positive interpersonal qualities to maintain supportive relationships and alliances in the political realm needed to implement policies. The study authors noted that the Ambitious pattern plays a very limited role in his overall personality functioning. Based on the configuration of scores in the profile, it was anticipated that Biden would be a "collegial leader," a "good listener" who "sees both sides of issues," with a "willingness to take a back seat in the policy-making process, who prefers consensus-building and group-maintenance techniques"; an "uniter, not a divider." The study authors noted, however, that Biden might be unduly open to pressure and influence, which could make him vulnerable to pressures within his party and impede his leadership effectiveness in negotiations or conflicts with foreign adversaries. Additionally, Biden's modest levels of ambition and dominance, low conscientiousness, and relatively superficial cognitive style associated with the outgoing pattern might hamper his presidential performance.

Personality traits of 'Great' US Presidents

Rubenzon et al.,⁷ conducted a study in which the personalities of 41 US presidents were assessed by 115 biographers or other experts who had protracted contact with a president. The number of raters of presidents ranged from 1 to 13, with an approximate average of

4 raters for each president. The raters completed questionnaires concerning presidents, including the NEO-PI-R, a well-validated personality inventory based on the five-factor model of personality. The ratings were made in reference to the 5-year period *before* presidents entered office. Next, utilizing information from two prior studies of presidential performance based on ratings by 846 historians, Rubenzon et al. obtained correlations between personality ratings and performance ratings of US Presidents. The performance rating in one of the two prior studies was a single summary item answered on a 1 to 5 scale. The performance rating in the other study included ratings on job performance in five areas: leadership qualities, accomplishments and crisis management, political skill, appointments, and character and integrity. Rubenzon et al. found that the average *T* scores of U.S. Presidents on the NEO-PI-R, as compared to normative scores on this personality inventory, were relatively higher on Extraversion and Conscientiousness, relatively lower on Openness to Experience, moderately lower on Agreeableness, and comparable on Neuroticism. The pattern of facet scores suggested that, on average, US Presidents obtained high scores on Achievement Striving and Assertiveness and low scores on Openness to Values (low scores indicate high endorsement of traditional values and moral authority) and Straightforwardness, with low scores on this facet indicating a willingness to prevaricate and to bully or manipulate people to get their way.

Concerning the Big Five personality factors related to ratings of presidential success or historical greatness, Openness to Experience had the highest correlation with historian ratings of presidential greatness, with correlations ranging between .25 and .32. Rubenzon et al.,⁷ asserted that there is considerable overlap between openness and cognitive ability and that cognitive ability is probably one of the strongest predictors of success. They cited support from the work of Simonton,¹² who utilized factor analysis of ratings of presidents on the Gough Adjective Checklist. The factor analysis yielded 14 orthogonal dimensions, one labeled "Intellectual Brilliance," which strongly overlaps conceptually with Openness. The Intellectual Brilliance dimension had high loadings on Wide Interests, Artistic, Inventive, Curious, Intelligent, Sophisticated, Complicated, Insightful, Wise and Idealistic, and negative loadings on Dull and Commonplace. Of the 14 extracted dimensions, only Intellectual Brilliance was significantly associated with a composite measure of presidential greatness.

Rubenzon et al.,⁷ found that Conscientiousness had the second highest correlation with presidential success; correlations had small, positive effects; the Achievement-Striving facet was one of the two strongest predictors of presidential success or greatness.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, Agreeableness had small, *negative* associations with presidential success. Rubenzon et al. noted that whereas agreeableness traits are important in personal relationships, tendencies to resist influence, not to be easily led, and to use tactics such as tricking, manipulating, bullying, or lying to persuade people and achieve their ends have been used by some great presidents. However, the Tender-mindedness facet of Agreeableness had a moderately large correlation with attaining historical greatness.

Extraversion was found to have a small positive correlation with presidential greatness. The Assertiveness facet of Extraversion and the Achievement Striving facet of Conscientiousness were the strongest predictors of greatness.

Neuroticism was generally unrelated to presidential greatness. However, the Vulnerability facet of Neuroticism had a negative relationship with greatness, suggesting that greater presidential performance is associated with resiliency, cool-headedness, hardiness, and a general ability to cope well with stress.

Is President Biden a highly successful US President?

Before discussing President Biden's success or greatness as a US president, it should be noted that there is both convergence and divergence in the findings of Book et al.,¹ and Griebie and Immelman.² Notably, Biden was rated as highly extraverted in both studies, e.g., sociable, gregarious, lively, engaging, enthusiastic, socially confident, and uninhibited. Biden was rated in both studies as reasonably high in agreeableness and being accommodating. Griebie and Immelman stated, "The core diagnostic feature of the expressive acts of Accommodating individuals is the *avoidance of self-assertion*." Book et al. rated Biden as high on Conscientiousness; in contrast, Biden was rated as low on Conscientiousness in the study by Griebie and Immelman. People with low scores on the MIDC Conscientiousness scale are likely to be flexible, spontaneous, and adaptable. They value creativity and variety and tend to resist conformity and routine. Griebie and Immelman suggest it is unlikely that Biden is inflexible or closed-minded; however, his well-defined outgoing pattern tends not to be associated with deep, reflective thinking but instead with a relatively unreflective, superficial cognitive style in which information is processed at the level of impressionistic generalities. Nevertheless, they offer that "Biden probably possesses a moderately high level of conceptual complexity." In the Book et al. study, Biden was rated as high on Perfectionism and Diligence but also high on flexibility. Perfectionism and flexibility are typically seen as opposing traits, although they are not mutually exclusive.

Rubenzet et al.,⁷ found that Assertiveness and Achievement-Striving were the two most potent predictors of presidential greatness. President Biden was not rated as high on these traits, particularly in the study by Griebie and Immelman. Whereas Biden was rated as reasonably high on Agreeableness or Accommodating, agreeableness was found to be *negatively* correlated with presidential greatness by Rubenzet et al., which may signify that great presidents are not easily led or persuaded; instead, they can be stubborn and willing to risk disagreements and conflicts with others. On the other hand, the Tender-Mindedness facet of the NEO-PI-R was found to have a moderately large correlation with greatness. Biden was given a high rating on the Sentimentality facet of the HEXACO. Additionally, Straightforwardness had a moderately negative association with presidential greatness. On the HEXACO, Biden was given a low rating on the Sincerity facet of the Honesty-Humility domain. Rubenzet et al. note that some great or successful presidents used various tactics to persuade people to achieve their ends. Many politicians are likely perceived by the public as low on sincerity. Thus, perceptions of low sincerity might not be disadvantageous for President Biden. On the other hand, low sincerity, or insincerity, is not necessarily synonymous with unethical, deviant, or corrupt behavior, which is less likely to be acceptable to the American public. In this connection, a Yahoo News/YouGov survey of voters found that nearly half of those surveyed (48 %) believe President Biden did something "illegal" regarding his son, Hunter Biden, compared with 31 % who say he did not.¹³ It is unclear at this time what impact such belief has concerning the public's support or approval of President Biden.

As noted earlier, Rubenzet et al. found that Openness to Experience had the strongest association with ratings of presidential greatness among the Big Five personality domains. Rubenzet et al. further assert that Openness might be a proxy for cognitive ability to a certain extent. Simonton^{12,14} suggests that Intellectual Brilliance overlaps with, but is separable from, Openness and IQ and that the former is most highly associated with presidential greatness. Whereas Book et al.'s study rated Biden as relatively high on Inquisitiveness, approximately at the

73rd percentile, Biden did not receive high ratings on Creativity and Unconventionality. Similarly, Griebie and Immelman suggest that Biden is likely not a deep, reflective thinker but "probably possesses a moderately high level of conceptual complexity." As such, it would not appear that Biden would rank high on the construct of Intellectual Brilliance.

Conclusion

With 14 months remaining in his current presidential term, President Biden has consistently low approval ratings on issues such as the economy, immigration, crime and public safety, and foreign policy. Public opinion polls do not necessarily reflect a president's performance, albeit it is logical to assume there is some connection. Around the time of President Biden's election in 2020, mental health experts offered predictions of his presidential performance based on indirect assessments of his public persona. The studies cited here assessed President Biden as high on prosocial traits. Still, it was noted that Biden might be vulnerable to pressures within his party and that his leadership effectiveness in negotiations or conflicts with foreign adversaries might be hampered. Additionally, Biden's modest ambition and dominance, low conscientiousness, and relatively superficial cognitive style associated with the outgoing personality pattern might impede his presidential performance.² It is unclear whether these personality factors relate to his low approval ratings. On the other hand, his adeptness in maintaining alliances with Democrat constituents and his fellow Democrat elected officials may be a political asset associated with his outgoing, extraverted personality style. His high ratings on Sentimentality and Tendermindedness, facets of Agreeableness, might also appeal to many people. The majority of Democrats approve of his performance.

Even though particular personality factors have been associated with ratings of presidential greatness, predictions of presidential performance will always be difficult. Examining whether President Biden has had a successful presidency thus far may be premature. There are occasions when presidential decisions and actions concerning a crucial event, often in foreign policy, have significantly influenced public perceptions of the president. For example, even while most Americans supported the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, most Americans criticized the execution of US troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. The most significant level of armed conflict in decades in the Middle East is occurring at present. President Biden has taken a clear and strong stance on the US position, viz., this conflict. In time, he may be perceived as a strong national and world leader on this issue as he has been in the war between Russia and Ukraine. His decisions in managing the vital geopolitical challenges facing the US at this time may become an essential part of his legacy. It has been said, "Some great presidents are not great persons, just as some great persons do not make great presidents..."¹⁴ Can a more average, "conciliatory extravert" rise to challenges to become a great president? Ultimately, historians in the future will adjudge his presidency.

Acknowledgements

None.

Conflicts of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

References

1. Book A, Visser, B, Volk A. Average Joe, crooked Hillary, and the unstable narcissist: expert impressions of 2016 and 2020. *PsyArXiv*. 2020.

2. Griebie AM, Immelman A. The personality profile and leadership style of U.S. President Joe Biden. Paper presented at the 44th Annual Scientific Meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology. 2021.
3. Palmer BB. Science's advice for President Elect Biden: The science of modeling can help unite and heal us. *Psychology Today*. 2020.
4. Balz D, Clement S, Guskin E. Post-ABC poll: Biden faces criticism on economy, immigration and age. *Washington Post*; 2023.
5. Graham J. Biden approval rating sinks to new low on economic issues. *Investor's Business Daily*. 2023.
6. Blake A. Biden's age may be a growing problem for his reelection. *Washington Post*; 2023.
7. Rubenzer SJ, Faschingbauer TR, Ones DS. Assessing the U.S. presidents using the revised NEO personality inventory. *Assessment*. 2000;7:403–420.
8. Jones JM. Presidential job approval related to reelection historically. *Gallup*. 2020.
9. Woolley J, Peters G. The American Presidency project.
10. Visser BA, Book A, Volk A. Is Hillary dishonest and Donald narcissistic? A HEXACO analysis of the presidential candidates' public personas. *Personality and Individual Differences*. 2017;106:281–286.
11. Millon T. Millon index of personality styles, manual. San Antonio, TX: The Psychological Corporation. 1994.
12. Simonton DK. Presidential personality: biographical use of the gough adjective checklist. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 1986;51:149–160.
13. Romano A. Americans not sold yet on Biden impeachment, but nearly half think he did something 'illegal' regarding son Hunter. *Yahoo/News*. 2023.
14. Simonton DK. Intellectual brilliance and presidential performance: Why pure intelligence (or Openness) doesn't suffice. *Journal of Intelligence*. 2018;6:18.