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Personality and Politics

In a well-known routine from the mid 1970s, the late comedian George Carlin, an astute observer of language, made light of incongruent phrases such as "jumbo shrimp" and "military intelligence." As a parallel to Carlin's list of words that "don't go together"[1] we might add people in unlikely professions or roles, individuals such as a cautious daredevil, an unreflective philosopher, a disagreeable yes-man, or an introverted motivational speaker. Or, thinking of social and political actors, we might contemplate the rude and uncaring volunteer, the timid lobbyist, or the open-minded ideologue.

These individuals resist imagination because, by their nature, some types of people seem to be poor fits for certain occupations, avocations, and roles. The phrase "by their nature" refers to people's enduring tendencies, or traits. Many students of the psychology of individual differences examine the content and significance of basic traits. In simplest form, such inquiry involves a two-step process: Key differences in traits are identified, followed by exploration of possible relationships between these traits and attitudes and behaviors. Intuition and everyday experience underlie many of the patterns we can envision, in some cases to the point that relationships may seem virtually tautological. For instance, we expect scientists to be systematic, counselors to be sympathetic, and entertainers to be outgoing. But these relationships are not tautological. To the contrary, if we study these possible patterns and the resultant evidence corroborates our expectations, an exercise of this sort would demonstrate that traits matter. By knowing something about a person's general psychological tendencies, we potentially would be able to enrich our understanding of this person's specific behaviors and attitudes.

Traits of the type alluded to here typically fall under the rubric of "personality." Hence, to a substantial extent, the study of the psychology of

[1] From the very first episode of *Saturday Night Live*, aired on October 11, 1975.

individual differences involves the study of personality. Personality has had a somewhat curious history in the field of psychology, and also in research on citizens and politics. Although plausible links between personality and political behavior abound, and although few serious scholars of mass politics would doubt that variance in basic traits contributes to differences in political behavior, research in this area has been decidedly sparse. In my judgment, this situation is highly unfortunate. The central thesis advanced in this book holds that personality is consequential for citizens' political attitudes and actions. Through systematic attention to the psychology of individual differences, I contend that we can gain considerable new insight regarding the underpinnings of virtually all aspects of mass political behavior. My goal in this book is to demonstrate this point both analytically and empirically.

Incorporating personality in our accounts of political behavior requires an important change in our views regarding when and how citizens' encounters with the political world gain shape. Some perspectives on political behavior seemingly presuppose that all political judgments are formed in the moment. People receive information regarding a candidate or issue, respond to that information, and come to their own conclusions. Other theories recognize that people's values and political predispositions bring continuity to their views of the political world. Thus, as one example, the long-time Democrat can be expected to vote differently than the loyal Republican. In this book, I argue that the roots of political behavior run even deeper. I contend that any theoretical or empirical account of political behavior necessarily will be incomplete if it fails to contemplate the enduring, and possibly innate, factors that distinguish us. I focus on personality because I believe that people do not encounter the environment as if they were blank slates, political or otherwise. Personality is about who we are as individuals. Moreover, to a substantial extent, our personalities are written in our genetic codes. People are not merely products of their socialization experiences, and behavior is not merely a response to one's environment. We all know people who have exhibited similar patterns of behavior throughout their entire lives, such as friends who always have been punctual, sloppy or shy. These life-long consistencies in behavior reflect in no small part the impact of enduring psychological differences – the impact of personality.

This chapter develops the foundation for attention to personality and politics. First, the concepts of personality and traits are defined and assessed in an effort to clarify the place of traits in contemporary psychological research on personality. Second, past research on personality and politics is reviewed with an eye toward showing that previous work in this area has been insightful, but also that much work remains to be done. Third, I advance the general case for incorporation of a trait approach

within multifaceted theories guiding the study of citizens' political attitudes and behaviors. As part of this case, I advocate use of a particular comprehensive, broadscale model of trait structure.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

Early in 1991, while finishing my doctoral dissertation, I began my search for employment in academia. Like many students of mass political behavior, my research at that time drew heavily on concepts developed by social psychologists.[2] During one job interview, a faculty member asked, "What's your theory?" I dutifully set out to explain the foundational efforts in cognitive psychology, the adaptations and extensions of the work that had taken place in recent years in social psychology, and the further adaptations and extensions underway among students of mass politics. However, as soon as I uttered the word "psychology," I was cut off and sternly informed that "psychology is about aberrant individual behavior. It has nothing to do with politics." To me, this was a bizarre statement. Yes, I thought, many clinical psychologists do study and treat psychological disorders, but to conceptualize the entire field of psychology exclusively in those terms is, quite obviously, far too limiting.[3] After all, like many of the people then engaged in research on mass politics, I had read and cited countless articles on attitude formation and change, and information processing and decision making, articles that had appeared in outlets such as the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. These works most certainly were not about aberrant individual-level behavior.

In retrospect, my view in 1991 was itself too limited. Although I recognized the political relevance of research on social psychology, the word "personality" in the title *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* barely caught my attention. If anything, it seemed like an anachronism. In part, my view was a product of the times. Research in the area of trait psychology had experienced a tumultuous, relatively unproductive period that lasted for more than a decade. An era of resurgence had begun by 1991, but this revitalization was in a fledgling state, and news of it had not yet produced much influence on work in political science, where social psychological approaches were the rage. In the ensuing years, the new generation of scholarship on traits grew to healthy maturity. Today, research on personality traits enjoys a stunning vibrancy, cohesiveness,

[2] My doctoral research was on the political application of dual-processing models, and, more specifically, on heuristic processing of source cues.

[3] Truth be told, I actually stopped midway through mumbling to myself "this guy is nuts," fearful that by positing such a diagnosis I might be supporting his proposition.

and sense of purpose in the field of psychology. Nonetheless, it remains the case that this line of inquiry has had only a minimal impact among students of political behavior. In my judgment, the relative lack of influence to date should not be interpreted to mean that a trait approach is destined to be uninformative. Instead, contemporary trait models offer an exciting opportunity for research on political behavior, but an opportunity that has not yet been seized, or even recognized, by most analysts in the field.

If I am to make the case that attention to variance in personality traits can help us to understand mass politics, the first step entails definition of terms. Psychology is about more than aberrant, individual-level behavior, but it is also about more than models of information processing and attitude change. Traditionally, research on personality has constituted a central pillar of the discipline, and, in turn, trait perspectives have held a pivotal place in research on personality. But what do these concepts mean, and how can we most fruitfully incorporate them in applied research concerning mass political behavior?

In 1973, the noted trait psychologist Raymond Cattell wrote of personality (Cattell 1973, 41), "personality is like love: everyone agrees it exists, but disagrees on what it is." In the ensuing years, this disagreement has not abated. The existence of multiple definitions of personality comes as little surprise in a field populated with such diverse figures as Sigmund Freud, Abraham Maslow, and B. F. Skinner. Searching for an adequate definition of personality, I have reviewed countless journal articles and textbooks. I have encountered some authors who define personality in clear, concrete (but not uncontroversial) terms, others who understand personality as the sum of its parts, still others who view personality in terms of its behavioral consequences, and a last group who cast personality in virtually impenetrable thesaurus-chewing psychological jargon. I am hardly the first student of politics to be frustrated by this state of affairs. To the contrary, many of the most prominent scholars in political psychology have bemoaned this same lack of definitional clarity. For instance, a generation ago Fred Greenstein (1969, 2–3) noted that "psychologists themselves have been chronically unable to arrive at a commonly accepted definition of 'personality.'"

My approach to this situation is three-fold. First, I suggest that we must resign ourselves to the unlikelihood that we will craft a single, definitive, and universally accepted conceptualization of personality and must be satisfied, instead, with construction of a plausible, functional view. Second, development of this perspective should be purposive. Personality can be conceived in multiple ways and toward multiple ends. In this book, I invoke a trait approach in the study of personality, and I do so with the objective of exploring possible links between personality and

political behavior. Viewed pragmatically, personality must be considered with ends such as these in mind. Third, I believe that personality is most fruitfully understood via simultaneous attention to form and function. Personality cannot be observed directly, but we can gain a satisfactory sense of the concept of personality through discussion of its component parts and the psychological purposes they serve.

When we contemplate the behaviors of a given individual, one potentially useful categorization scheme involves distinguishing actions that are typical of the person in question from ones that are not. The latter might include, as examples, instances when the person acts unusually in a familiar situation, such as when a generally calm driver bursts into a fit of road rage, and times when the person acts unexpectedly in a novel situation, such as when the easygoing nun breaks out her judo skills to stave off a would-be mugger, or when your quiet friend steals the show on her first time at karaoke night. Although atypical and unexpected behaviors such as these may be interesting, my focus here – and the focus of most trait psychologists – centers primarily on individuals' consistent patterns of behavior. Personality has something to do with these consistent behavior patterns. When we say "it's not like Jerry to fly off the handle like that," what we mean is that Jerry's behavior in this instance sits at odds with Jerry's personality.

My claim that personality "has something to do" with people's patterns of behavior admittedly abounds with ambiguity. To add precision, the first point to emphasize is that several factors combine to define the individual's personality. At question is what elements characterize the person: What makes us who we are? Included may be core beliefs, values, emotions, and so on. Importantly, these elements of personality, for the most part, cannot be observed directly, and, correspondingly, personality itself defies direct observation. Therefore, when we move from the concept of personality to empirical representations of that concept, we necessarily must engage in inference, because a full, direct operationalization of personality is not possible.[4]

Second, personality as conceived of here endures over extended periods of time, bringing continuity to a person's character, and ultimately to his or her behavior. Personality traits exhibit tremendous stability over time, and, in doing so, contribute to persistent tendencies in political behavior. Many students of human behavior examine situation-specific actions, and some work on personality also focuses on situational variance. I in no way reject the value of such perspectives. Clearly, many aspects of human behavior do indeed vary by situation. Nonetheless, my

[4] For a related view, see Winter (2003b, 115). The same is true, of course, for most concepts in psychology, including many that have been studied by political scientists.

conception of personality highlights psychological properties that remain stable over time. In other words, they are trans-situational. Introverts sometimes engage in behaviors characteristic of extraverts, and vice versa. But despite this reality, both the introvert and the extravert possess what are, in effect, central psychological tendencies. My interest in this book is in identifying such central tendencies and exploring their possible significance for political behavior. As we will see, in some instances the effects of personality on political behavior emerge in interaction with situational forces. But even in these cases, personality itself remains an enduring source of influence.

Combining these two points, it follows that "personality" as conceptualized in this study refers to a multifaceted and enduring internal, or psychological, structure. It is further assumed that personality is substantially rooted in biology, and that personality influences behavior. From this perspective, there is something intrinsic in each of us, largely present at birth, that defines who and what we are, and that shapes how we behave. We possess traits, values, and goals that combine to give us our individuality and to influence our actions. Sally *is* an extravert, and, as one, she tends to be talkative. James *is* conscientious, and, as a result, he tends to be punctual. Again, my approach is purposive. Personality is construed here in a manner that is rooted in psychological theory, but also in a manner that facilitates empirical inquiry. With this construction in hand, the task I pursue in this book involves development of a means to represent personality in empirical form, followed by exploration of possible consequences of variance in personality for politically significant attitudes and behaviors.

As noted earlier, psychologists who study personality have devised countless definitions of personality, definitions that often bear strikingly little resemblance to one another. Likewise, the view posited here has much in common with some psychologists' interpretations of personality, but very little in common with others. I have defined personality as a biologically influenced and enduring psychological structure that shapes behavior. My approach is most consistent with – and is most informed by – the perspectives of trait psychologists. In my judgment, research on trait psychology, especially research reported in the past two decades, collectively offers a plausible theoretical depiction of personality, a corresponding means to represent personality in empirical form, and a body of empirical research that provides an excellent foundation for the derivation of hypotheses regarding possible links between personality and political behavior.

Although differences can be found concerning the precise meaning of traits, consensus exists at a more general level regarding the nature and significance of traits as they relate to personality. Pervin (2003, 38)

notes, for instance, that trait psychologists largely agree on two central points: that "traits represent basic categories of individual differences in functioning" and that "traits are useful as the basic units of personality." Among more specific definitions of traits, several provide insights helpful for our purposes. Kreitler and Kreitler (1990, 4) write that "a trait is essentially a relatively stable tendency or feature characteristic of an individual," and "most of the descriptive terms about people that we have in language are trait names." Allen (1994, 1) defines personality traits as "internally based psychological characteristics that often correspond to adjectival labels." Winter (2003b, 115) views traits as "the public, observable element of personality, the consistencies of style readily noticed by other people." Lastly, McCrae and Costa (2003, 25), leading figures in the revitalization of trait research, initially defined traits[5] as "dimensions of individual differences in tendencies to show consistent patterns of thoughts, feelings, and actions."

Several features of these definitions warrant emphasis.[6] First, traits are presumed to possess an inner locus. As with personality itself, traits typically are seen as psychological structures or properties. Gordon Allport (1937) was one of the first prominent students of traits. Central in his research, and in most subsequent work in the field, was the premise that traits are mental structures. Second, traits are thought to be relatively fixed and enduring. Allen (1994, 427) writes, for example, that "a trait is a permanent entity that does not fade in and out," and Kreitler and Kreitler (1990, 4) suggest that traits are "stable individual characteristics." Most trait psychologists allow for the possibility of some marginal change in traits over time, and especially over the life cycle (e.g., Eysenck 1951), but traits as a whole are depicted as being highly consistent. Indeed, a central claim in Eysenck's research was that there is a biological foundation to traits, and evidence supporting this view will be reviewed in the next chapter. This perspective bolsters the depiction of traits as highly stable internal structures.

A third point to emphasize is that traits influence behavior. Raymond Cattell (1946) summarized matters in a simple, direct form with the contention that personality is what enables us to predict how an individual will behave in a given situation. The relationship between traits and behavior of course is not absolute, but people who possess certain traits will tend to engage in corresponding behaviors. Fourth, traits are susceptible to observation. Traits bring regularities in how we think, feel,

[5] McCrae and Costa refined their definition as work on their particular model of trait structure progressed. I discuss these developments in Chapter 2.

[6] For a useful history and discussion of the role of traits in research on personality, see Matthews and Deary (1998, chap. 1.)

and behave, and these give rise to patterns that are observable both to ourselves and to others. People routinely describe one another in terms of the general patterns or tendencies they observe. That we *can* do this is testament to the fact that language has developed in a manner that captures important individual differences. That we *do* engage in such description speaks to the centrality of traits in human behavior and social interaction.

If traits are the basic units of personality, can personality be defined as a sum of an individual's traits? Some psychologists say yes (e.g., Guilford 1959), but the consensus holds that personality constitutes more than just the sum of traits. Consistent with this latter view, I argue that traits represent many important enduring differences across individuals, and, as a result, that a holistic depiction of trait structure captures much of what we mean by personality. Again, this is a functional perspective. Personality includes elements in addition to traits,[7] but attention to traits in this book facilitates exploration of possible links between at least some important aspects of personality and variance in political behavior.

Research that is centered on traits requires an ordering mechanism. Literally thousands of adjectival descriptions exist, corresponding with a large number of distinct traits, creating what John and Robins (1993, 219) described as a "semantic nightmare." This reality constituted one of two noteworthy factors limiting research in trait psychology – and, by implication, applications of a trait approach in the study of political behavior – for many years. The pioneering efforts of Allport, Cattell, and Eysenck were initiated in the 1930s and 1940s. Although numerous scholars in the field subsequently advanced models of trait structure or championed the significance of particular traits, no consensus existed for decades regarding the utility of any single theoretical framework. Scientific progress is difficult in such a context because of the tendency of scholars with differing preferred perspectives to talk past one another. As John and Srivastava (1999, 102) explained, the "systematic accumulation of findings and the communication among researchers has become difficult amidst the Babel of concepts and scales." Today, the situation is much improved. Although disagreements inevitably will persist in such an expansive field, a wealth of research conducted primarily within the past two decades provides strong support for a new generation of holistic

[7] Among psychologists, debate persists regarding the precise link between traits and other facets of personality such as beliefs and motives. An interesting perspective on this point is offered by Kreitler and Kreitler (1990, 8–10). Much of the problem in reaching consensus naturally stems from the fact that the elements of personality are not directly observable, and therefore neither are the interactions among those elements.

trait models. These "five-factor" or "Big Five" models have brought a dramatic rejuvenation in research on trait psychology and have led to a vast and rapidly growing body of applied work – a body of work to which the present study contributes. Today, it is possible to represent the central elements of trait structure with parsimonious measures that are focused on five core trait dimensions.

The revitalization of research on personality traits followed a period in which scholars who studied individual psychological differences were shaken, and even embittered, by strong critiques of their efforts. Collectively, these concerns served as a second force that slowed the work on traits. Many years prior to the efforts of Allport, Cattell, and Eysenck, Thorndike (1903) argued against the very existence of personality traits. Scholars in the field mostly disregarded this view once research began to accumulate that demonstrated the existence of replicable trait structures. Starting in the late 1960s, however, a new round of criticism emerged. Goldberg (1995, 34) explained that, as a consequence, "the 1970s witnessed the virtual abandonment of major segments of personality research, including the investigation of personality-trait structure." Walter Mischel (1968) was the most prominent and vociferous skeptic in this period, arguing that purported individual differences measured on trait batteries often bore little relationship to behavior (see also Shweder 1975).[8] Mischel's central argument held that behavior exhibits little consistency across situations, undermining the possible importance of traits.

Taken to its extreme, if we were to assume the absence of transsituational continuity, this critique would indeed strike a fatal blow against any claimed utility of a trait approach. Kreitler and Kreitler (1990, 16) contend, for instance that

> [B]ehavior is not as consistent as the concept of trait would lead us to believe. Indeed, it is not at all consistent, at least as it appears to most researchers. The problem is of paramount importance in the study of personality at large, because without intraindividual consistency, there can hardly be interindividual differences and certainly no basis for upholding a unit such as a trait.

[8] Hans Eysenck took on a lead role in defending research on traits against the critique leveled by Mischel. See, for example, Eysenck and Eysenck (1980). This debate clearly seems to have worn on the participants. For instance, the Eysenck and Eysenck piece includes an editorial note that reads, in part, "Professor Mischel has declined an offer of space for a reply, stating that his position is sufficiently well documented to make this unnecessary" (p. 204). Other figures in the field characterize Mischel's influence in disparaging terms. Digman (1990, 420) describes Mischel and other critics as "born-again fundamentalists who excoriated trait theory as akin to scientific sin." Citing Mischel, Goldberg (1993, 26) began one piece with the words "once upon a time, we had no personalities."

In my view, the Kreitlers' position well exceeds the scope of the available evidence. First, Mischel himself did not take such an absolutist stance, contending that trans-situational correlations in individual behavior were low, *not* that these correlations were nonexistent. For example, looking back on the controversy surrounding his work, Mischel wrote that "no one seriously questions that lives have continuity and that we perceive ourselves and others as relatively stable individuals who have substantial identity and stability over time, even when our specific actions change across situations" (1979, 742). Mischel's view of human behavior highlights situation-specific action, but even Mischel reported correlations in the range of 0.30 in patterns of behavior across situations. Such marks clearly fall short of establishing that traits, and especially traits alone, *determine* behavior. However, these findings deny neither the existence of traits nor the suggestion that traits correspond with general tendencies in human behavior. Second, a chief element of Mischel's critique questioned the validity of observer ratings, but later work has responded directly to this point (e.g., Moskowitz and Schwarz 1982). Third, Mischel subsequently (Mischel and Shoda 1995) sought to reconcile his situational perspective with traditional views of traits.[9]

As an outsider to this debate, my view is that the disputants drew unnecessary lines in the sand. Take a moment and think of the calmest, most unflappable person you know, and also the most nervous, easily agitated of your acquaintances. Even the former may emerge a bit frayed following a trans-Atlantic flight seated between a tipsy salesman and a parent with a colicky baby, and even the latter may appear relaxed and content following a weekend at the spa. Thus, the claim that behavior is in part determined by situation rings true. However, the very fact that we can bring these acquaintances to mind speaks to the presence of observable consistency in human behavior. We all have seen our calm friends *be* calm on multiple occasions, including in circumstances that would have driven our nervous friends over the edge. Human behavior is characterized by situational variance around discernible central tendencies. Consequently, identification of intraindividual differences in behavior across situations does not mean that the possible significance of traits should be dismissed.

Researchers in trait psychology concur with this view. Although the Mischel critique marked a setback, scholars in the field rebounded with

[9] The general thrust of Mischel's later position is that stable traits can bring conditional effects on behavior if personality is conceived as a mediating process rather than as an enduring general tendency. Some of the tests conducted later in this book are loosely in the spirit of this perspective in that possible interactions between traits and other predictors are examined.