

The Traits of Approval: Leadership Trait Theory Analysis as a Predictor of American  
Presidential Approval Ratings

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## **Introduction**

In an increasingly polarized political climate in the United States, the presidency has become a central target and focal point of partisan conflict (see e.g., Jacobson 2016). More than two centuries after George Washington became the first President of the United States, one might expect Americans to share a common understanding of what makes a president effective and popular. While a few important books have addressed this subject (see e.g., Barber 1972; Greenstein 2000), much of that scholarship is now dated, leaving a gap in the academic literature. The blueprint, so to speak, for effective presidential leadership in the modern era remains unclear. This raises an important question, “What leadership qualities reliably predict a successful presidency, a popular president, or a winning presidential candidate in the modern era?”

One major challenge in leadership research is quantifying or operationalizing personal qualities in ways that allow scholars to make informed and valid conclusions about who makes a good leader and why. These questions often require a degree of psychoanalysis. But how can we study leaders or subjects outside of a clinical setting?

Leadership studies and political science intersect in ways that make it possible for scholars to study leadership traits and characteristics as they pertain to presidential success (Barber 1972; Greenstein 2000). The purpose of this thesis is to explore the relationship between psychological leadership qualities and presidential approval ratings from Ronald Reagan to Joe Biden.

Using at-a-distance methods, piloted by numerous political psychoanalysts and leadership scholars, this thesis will specifically use Margaret Hermann’s coding scheme for verbal behaviors of leaders and apply it to the various president between 1981 and 2024. Traits in

Hermann's Leadership Trait Analysis Theory include the following seven traits: distrust in others, task orientation, belief in one's ability to control events, in-group bias, self-confidence, conceptual complexity, and one's need for power. The research question that this thesis is based upon is, "How does a president's verbal behavior affect their perceived leadership traits—and from there, is there a relationship between a president's leadership traits and their approval ratings?"

This paper will explain Leadership Trait Theory and At-A-Distance research methodology and how they can be used to study presidents—further, how certain traits of presidents can affect their approval ratings and their public perception. The literature review will discuss what political leadership scholars have discovered so far, and it will reveal the gaps in the field where this study works to fill. Presidential traits have been studied and so has their approval rating, but by using Hermann's trait theory analysis, a new methodology to predicting presidential approval emerges. This thesis reveals the statistical significance between leadership traits, that have no correlation to one another, to explain an increase or a decrease in approval ratings. It also lays out a new limb of political candidacy because this project proves that self-confidence in a president has exponential impact on their approval ratings.

## **Literature Review**

Political and leadership scholars have long sought to understand leadership as it pertains to the office of the president, and more broadly, how leadership may describe behaviors of political leaders. One scholar, James Barber, used a typology to explain four different categories of presidents. He focused on the dichotomy of activity and passivity and also positivity and negativity. His methods can be imagined as looking like a plus sign. From this categorization emerges four labels of presidents: the active-positive president, the active-negative president, the

passive-positive, and the passive-negative. Barber argues that the way this theory categorizes American presidents creates a framework for predicting leadership qualities, and political behavior. In his book, “The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House,” Barber lists detailed empirical case studies of presidents including Nixon, Kennedy, Wilson and FDR (1972).

Though these case studies provided insight into how early life and personality development of presidents can play a crucial role in predicting performance, a critique of Barber’s work is that his methodology in predictability is based off subjective assessments of personalities of presidents, and not measurements. This flaw in the literature provided a clear gap of what political leadership needed to be recognized as metric-base and measurable, not just subjective claims.

A second scholar that has added a great deal of knowledge of presidential leadership to political science is Fred Greenstein. In his book “The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from FDR to George W. Bush,” emphasizes six dimensions of leadership significance. They are public communication, organizational capacity, political skills, vision, cognitive style, and emotional intelligence. Much like this project, Greenstein used specific traits that he theorized would be observable and related to a president’s competency instead of just personality alone—and unlike Barber’s personality categories. While Barber (1972) uses presidential personality to predict performance, Greenstein (2004) makes prediction about observation and specific observable qualities. A critique of Greenstein’s methodology is that his six leadership qualities are codependent on one another. For example, if a president is a good public communicator, than it can be expected that he has a good deal of organizational capacity. If he has a emotional intelligence, than it can be assumed that he would have political vision and good communication

skills. What this project seeks to do is find significant leadership traits that are independent of one another, without correspondence, to statistically predict approval rating. Though both scholars add a great deal of knowledge to the field, one thing that remains unspoken for is the ability to quantify leadership traits in a way that assigns numeric and testable values to them—a gap that this project seeks to fill.

Stanley Renshon is a political scholar who, unlike the two mentioned above, takes a psychological angle to studying presidential candidates. This project sets out to help find statistically relevant leadership traits that are coachable to eventually better presidential candidacy, and Renshon's book, "Psychological Assessment of Presidential Candidates" is a work that sets up a systematic approach to evaluating psychological characteristics of presidential candidates. Renshon's focus is on ambition, character, and cognitive skill of candidates. Unlike the scholars mentioned above, Renshon shows the importance that internal psychological characteristics have on the predictability of a candidate's electability. He also uses case studies in his book (1996), by showing how personality and psychological makeup can translate into political skill, governing style and public perception. These, in relation to this project, have a great deal to do with predicting approval rating.

Using the models that Barber used in his analysis, Renshon (1996) offers a psychological framework. Barber discusses emotional background and upbringing as a way to predict what a president may be like in the Oval Office, but building on that, Renshon suggests that traits like ambition, character and cognitive style are crucial to defining the potential performance of a presidential candidate if elected to office. This positions this scholar as a great voice and insight into the field of political leadership.

A noticeable facet of Renshon's methodology is that it all takes place in a quasi-clinical setting. There is a heavy reliance on his interpretation on the importance of psychological characteristics of presidential candidates. Though his work shows great advancement in studying individuals, what it lacks is an ability to generalize a set of quantifiable leadership traits as immediate predictors of higher or lower approval rating. That is an extremely important element that the methodology in this project sets to create.

When combined, Barber, Greenstein and Renshon's work creates a good foundation for understanding leadership traits as predictors of presidential behavior, cognitive skill and political vision. Barber offers a typology that sets the groundwork for character or categorical-based leadership and presidential personality. Greenstein introduces a concept of lists of traits as a checklist for political and behavioral competency in the Oval Office. Renshon provides a detailed psychological element to existing candidacy research.

This project sets out to build off of their research contributions by creating a generalizable, repeatable codebook and methodology that numerically assigns testable and measurable value to observable leadership traits of Presidents and presidential candidates—to not just predict behavior or try to explain motives, but to also better their chances of being a successful candidate and higher approved commander in chief.

### **Hermann's Leadership Trait Analysis**

Hermann defines leadership style as “the ways in which leaders relate to those around them—whether constituents, advisors, or other leaders—and how they structure interactions and norms, rules, and principles they use to guide such interactions” (2005). From this, she bases the styles or traits [used interchangeably] on three questions. These are as follows:

- (1) How do leaders react to political constraints in their environment, and do they respect or challenge those constraints?*
- (2) How open are leaders to incoming information—do they selectively use information or are they open to information directing their responses?*
- (3) What are the leader's reasons for seeking their positions—are they driven by internal focus of attention within themselves or by the relationships that can be formed from salient constituents.*

From these questions, Hermann establishes seven traits that are different from the ones typically defined by leadership theories by leadership theorists and communication scholars such as trait theory, great-man theory, contingency theory, etc. The traits used by Hermann's methodology, based on the questions above, narrow in on the ability of specifically recognized world leaders to verbalize psychological characteristics about themselves.

The seven traits that Hermann explains in her methodology are, in no particular order, distrust in others, task orientation, in-group bias, self-confidence, belief in ability to control events, conceptual complexity, and need for power. What is unique about these traits when used on a comprehensive model, is that they are independent of one another.

Hermann (2005) shows that Belief in ability to Control Events is the score that comes from when we examine political leaders taking action, deciding outcomes, or working towards political resolve. When leaders exhibit an ability to get to a conclusion, or to resolve a political or social dilemma, they are exhibiting their ability to control events.

Need for Power is a trait or score that is associated by Hermann (2005) with a leader's capacity and ability to establish, maintain and restore their influence as a leader. This is an important trait in this methodology because when a leader already has a heightened sense of

power, they “manipulate the environment” they are in to have control and influence and to eventually appear to public as a clear winner (Hermann, 2005). She shows that when a leader is need of gaining or reaching power, they tend to push the boundaries of their positions or “test the limits” before they stick to a plan.

Self-confidence is a score assigned to a leader’s self-importance or the image that they have of themselves. Hermann (2005) suggests that self-confidence comes from a leader’s ability to compare themselves to others and evaluating their positioning of themselves in certain contexts. Leaders without self-confidence, Hermann says, tend to seek high intakes on information before the know how to decide action in a situation or “conform to the demands of circumstances in which they find themselves.”

Conceptual Complexity, Hermann shows is a leader’s ability to differentiate people, places, policies, ideas and/or things. High levels of this in a leader comes from their ability to respond to and attend to a larger number of external stimuli in their environment. In the context of this project, it would be the issues and situations that arise in the Oval Office for presidents. For example, this could be conversations between other foreign leaders, it could be related to protected information in the Situation Room. It could extend to executive orders, running cabinet meetings, and discussing the actions of the other branches of government. Conceptual Complexity is the ability of a leader to be diligent in handling external problems and attending to multiple types of stimuli with ease.

Task orientation, or according to Hermann, motivation, is a trait in this thesis that revolves around the simplicity of a leader’s ability to solve problems. A leader high in this trait may show a high capacity of delegating work to quickly and effectively achieve a goal or reach a deadline. They use the momentum of task completion and action to effectively reach goals. They

use their staff and the people around them more as instruments in a machine rather than individuals, (Hermann, 2005). They tend to view the world in sets of problems, and the people around them as mechanisms to solving those problems. And a leader who does not show high rates in task orientation, simply do not. They may be considered by their peers and the public as not goal-oriented or not a problem solver.

Distrust in Others is a score assigned to leaders who reveal to be driven by threats of problems they have with other people or groups. In a global sense, Hermann shows that an example of a leader with high distrust in others may be more engaged in economic sanctions or military interventions. This score is important because it is one only two negative traits that are in Hermann's Leadership Trait Analysis. Distrust in Others and In-Group Bias are the two that should negatively affect approval ratings of presidents. Distrust in Others is a score that is assigned to leaders with an observable and "general feeling or sense of doubt, uneasiness, misgiving, and wariness about others" (Hermann, 2005).

In-Group Bias is a score or trait that is assigned to a leader who attaches strong emphasis or importance on fellow peers in their political, racial, ethnic, social, religious spheres. Leaders with high rates of in-group bias present a heightened effort to maintain in-group culture or promote the most benefit through political action for the groups that they are primarily or adjacently a part of.

The seven of these are important to creating a comprehensive leadership profile because they each play a vital role in explaining the relevance and capacity of a leader. Compiled together, they account for the token leadership qualities we associate with good leadership and in their absence, we associate with bad leadership. For example, under task-orientation comes problem solving. From conceptual complexity comes honesty and accountability of actions, and

a leader's ability to be well-spoken. From distrust in others, comes uncertainty, timidity or weaknesses associated with bad or a lack of leadership. Each of these should have high statistical significance to presidential approval rating.

The hypotheses are as follows:

H1: As the "Distrust in Others" score increases, presidential approval ratings will decrease.

H2: As the "Task Orientation" score increases, presidential approval ratings will increase.

H3: As the "In-Group Bias" score increases, presidential approval ratings will decrease.

H4: As the "Self Confidence" score increases, presidential approval ratings will increase.

H5: As the "Belief In Ability to Control Events" score increases, presidential approval will increase.

H6: As the "Conceptual Complexity" score increases, presidential approval will increase.

H7: As the "Need for Power" score increases, presidential approval ratings will decrease.

The hypotheses show that each of these leadership traits should have a statistical correlation to the public approval ratings of presidents.

There are positive traits in Hermann's theory as they pertain to this thesis, and there are negative traits. For example, the scores of traits that when they increase, approval ratings go down, are negative traits. This includes the DIS Score (Distrust in Others Score), IGB Score (In-Group Bias Score), and PWR Score (Need for Power Score). The other traits are positive traits. The coding used in the code book for this thesis have acronyms that will be commonly used in this paper. They are listed below:

*DIS Score = Distrust in Others*

*TASK Score = Task Orientation*

*BACE Score = Belief in Ability to Control Events*

*IGB Score = In-group Bias*

*SC Score = Self-Confidence*

*CC Score = Conceptual Complexity*

*PWR Score = Need for Power*

### **Operationalizing Leadership Traits**

Hermann is a main scholar that has spearheaded the study of leadership traits as it pertains to presidents using quantitative scoring methodology. This project primarily uses her coding mechanism to outline and define traits of presidents. In one of her articles, she writes the questions that arise from studying verbal behaviors of leaders. From this, she establishes seven traits and discusses how to numerically code each trait to form a score for each leader. These are the traits that this thesis uses in its codebook. Hermann and Preston (1994) look at presidents' behaviors and how they are foundational to how the structure of their administration and advising team. The article pays close attention to how presidents prefer to be delivered information and who they prefer to have near them in the White House. From this, the authors form a typology that they then use to determine the level of control each of them needs in order to feel powerful over policy creation. This article relates and adds to this thesis by it focusing on presidents' behaviors and how they trickle down to affect the organization of their administrations. Though these sources seem dated, they are foundational to the niche study of political leadership, especially in ways that offer scholars in the field a way quantitatively study variables that are typically subjectively or qualitatively studied by communication scholars.

Schafer's At-A-Distance Methodology found in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership* (2014), analyzes the use of At-A-Distance methods to study the behavioral

tendencies and leadership traits of leaders outside of a clinical setting. The handbook discusses literature that uses both qualitative and quantitative methods. It offers advancements made using the method while also highlighting some challenges or research dilemmas that scholars have had when using it in their research. Chapter 20 of the handbook relates to this project because it explains the use of this method and it adds research that has already been conducted. This was beneficial to this thesis because it provided a framework for how to operationalize leadership trait variables that would be statistically meaningful.

Absent a clinical setting, it is important to use verbal output that is authentic to the subject—in the case of this project, presidents. A dilemma with this study though, is that many presidential speeches are not written by them, and if they are, they are edited, reviewed and polished. The initial data collection stage of this project required verbal output that was not so planned. Verbal behavior – in the context of At-A-Distance Methodology, and more specifically, Hermann’s Leadership Trait Analysis – refers to a scholar’s ability to interpret what leaders say as indicative of their psychological traits and characteristics. This method is reliable by means of observability, availability, and analyzability (Schafer 2014). These three components, outside of a clinical setting are foundational to the reliability of a leader’s speeches, interviews, press briefings and other types of verbal communication from them.

With a coding system based on verbal cues of “spontaneous material,” Hermann (2005), defined leadership styles in a way that is different from leadership styles defined by the field of communication and leadership. Hermann’s Leadership Trait Analysis methodology is the basis of operationalizing each variable or leadership trait that is included in this study.

## **Methodology**

This project required a new codebook before I could begin running regression tests on the variables. This project used Gallup Polling Data, specifically approval ratings from US presidents starting with Ronald Reagan, and ending with Joe Biden (Gallup, 2025). Further, the codebook required more than one approval rating per president to create more variance amongst the variables. From Hermann's Leadership Trait Analysis Theory, she found scores to be most reliable when the scores were captured from unplanned speech output, instead of planned, written speeches of, in this case, presidents. To find interviews of presidents, this project utilized The American Presidency Project digital archive—a project out of UC Santa Barbara. The digital archive provided transcripts from interviews of presidents reaching back to Reagan.

Instead of calculating Hermann's scores by hand, which would have taken years of time even with a team of researchers, this project used a coding software called Profiler Plus. Profiler Plus was developed by Social Science Automation, Inc. and Ravenbook, Ltd., and was created by using applications and research put out by government agencies initially. Now, it is utilized by many different research fields including, media analytics, campaign research, athletics, and even forensic science. (Levine and Young 2014).

This project used the transcripts from The American Presidency Project digital archive and entered them into a TXT converter, and from there, the TXT files were submitted to Profiler Plus's analysis portal, where then the software would score the verbal output by each president and then email the scores of each trait that Hermann used in her methodology. Each presidential term received two full transcripts, with the shortest transcript being roughly two paragraphs long to the longest stretching to almost eight pages. To achieve higher variance amongst the variables, each president studied was given at least two approval ratings from their time in office—data

pulled from Gallup Polling. For example, Joe Biden only served one term, so therefore, he received two approval rating of Y scores, and he received 14 trait scores. The seven scores from Hermann's theory were used by the Profiler Plus software. George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan received four approval ratings and 28 scores because they served two terms in office.

The reason why the codebook only goes back to Reagan is because The American Presidency Project only has recorded transcripts from roughly 1980 to modern day. More modern presidents had quite an expansive list of archived interviews to choose from, but to maintain a sense of comparability or sameness between the presidents, I chose transcripts from mostly nonpartisan, well-recognized media outlets like ABC, Associated Press and CBS. There are some transcripts that are not from these outlets the closer to Reagan's data, and this is because earlier presidents had less access to television and radio journalists.

Once the scores were compiled, it allowed for the creation of a codebook that includes 22 variables, and each variable contains an approval rating and seven trait scores: DIS Score, TASK Score, IGB Score, SC Score, BACE Score, CC Score and PWR Score. These variables were then analyzed in SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for bivariate testing using OLS regression estimates. Leadership variables that were statistically significant ( $p < .10$ , one-tailed) in the initial bivariate analysis were next tested in a multivariate regression analysis to control for other factors that might also affect presidential approval ratings. One control variable is called "RALLY." This was to control for how approval may have been affected by a phenomenon called, "Rally Round the Flag" which is the political science concept that describes a short-term increase in approval ratings of presidents or other high-ranking government officials at the beginning of foreign or domestic conflict. "RALLY" controls for the conflicts in the Gulf War

and the War on Terror. Had more time been given for this project, I would have been able to control for more variables including economic variables, employment, etc.

## Findings

The bivariate linear regression analysis revealed that of the seven variables or the seven scores that were tested, three revealed statistical significance in how they related to the approval ratings of the presidents in this study. These variables were the DIS Score or the Distrust in Others score ( $p < .05$ ), the SC Score or the Self-Confidence Score ( $p < .05$ ), and the Conceptual Complexity Score or the CC Score ( $p < .10$ ).

**Table 1. Bivariate Analysis of Leadership Traits on Presidential Approval**

<u>Traits</u>	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Standard Error</u>
<b>Conceptual Complexity</b>	.631	.380
<u>Constant</u>	9.452	24.687
<u>Adjusted R Square</u>	.077	<u>Bivariate Sig /2</u>
<u>Statistical Significance</u>	.112*	.056**
<b>Distrust in Others</b>	-.298	.169
<u>Constant</u>	56.421	4.070
<u>Adjusted R Square</u>	.091	<u>Bivariate Sig /2</u>
<u>Statistical Significance</u>	.093	0.0465**
<b>Task Orientation</b>	.033	.253
<u>Constant</u>	48.465	14.587
<u>Adjusted R Square</u>	-.049	<u>Bivariate Sig /2</u>
<u>Statistical Significance</u>	.899*	.449*

<b>Belief in Ability to Control Events</b>	-.380	.524
<u>Constant</u>	54.123	5.709
<u>Adjusted R Square</u>	-0.23	<u>Bivariate Sig /2</u>
<u>Statistical Significance</u>	.869	.434*
<b>In-Group Bias</b>	-.380	.524
<u>Constant</u>	54.123	5.709
<u>Adjusted R Square</u>	-0.23	<u>Bivariate Sig /2</u>
<u>Statistical Significance</u>	.476	.238*
<b>Self-Confidence</b>	.463	.204
<u>Constant</u>	28.219	9.950
<u>Adjusted R. Square</u>	.165	<u>Bivariate Sig /2</u>
<u>Statistical Significance</u>	.034	.017**
<b>Need for Power</b>	-.109	.277
<u>Constant</u>	53.102	7.463
<u>Adjusted R Square</u>	-.042	<u>Bivariate Sig /2</u>
<u>Statistical Significance</u>	.699*	.349*

NOTE: \*P ≤ 1.0 \*\*P ≤ .05 \*\*\*P ≤ 0.01

**Table 2. Multivariate Analysis of Statistically Significant Leadership Traits on Presidential Approval with Rally Around the Flag Phenomena Control**

<u>Traits</u>	<u>Coefficient</u>	<u>Standard Error</u>
<b>Distrust in Others</b>	-.266	.167
<u>Rally Around the Flag</u>	10.146	7.338
<u>Constant</u>	54.850	4.139
<u>Adjusted R Square</u>	.131	
<u>Statistical Significance</u>	.127*	
<b>Self-Confidence</b>	.457	.195
<u>Rally Around the Flag</u>	11.501	6.817
<u>Constant</u>	27.419	9.532
<u>Adjusted R Square</u>	.236	
<u>Statistical Significance</u>	0.03**	
<b>Conceptual Complexity</b>	.481	.408
<u>Rally Around the Flag</u>	8.416	7.976
<u>Constant</u>	18.401	26.037
<u>Adjusted R Square</u>	.083	
<u>Statistical Significance</u>	.249*	

**NOTE:** \*P ≤ 1.0 \*\*P ≤ .05 \*\*\*P ≤ 0.01

The multivariate analysis, when controlling for the rally around the flag effect showed that self-confidence had the highest statistical significance in relation with approval rating. Additionally, there was a statistical correlation between distrust in others to approval rating.

This reveals that when presidents have higher distrust in others around them, the more negatively their approval ratings are affected. This means that if they have higher distrust, they will have lower approval ratings, regardless of a new conflict development. This also shows a

positive correlation between self-confidence and presidential approval ratings. The higher a president's self-confidence is, the higher their approval ratings will be.

## **Conclusion**

This study found that the higher a president's distrust in others were, the lower their approval ratings were, and the higher a president's self-confidence was, the higher their approval ratings were. These are important findings because they proved insight into leadership psychology by proving that individual psychological leadership traits manifest into real and measurable consequences to public approval. It is especially important to take note of the statistical significance that self-confidence has at it relates to approval rating. Self-confidence, that before this study was conducted, would have been considered a subjective way to view a president or a presidential candidate. With these findings, self-confidence becomes a subjective, measurable metric that can be used to predict, benefit and boost approval rating. When testing each of the traits in the bivariate analysis, each of them proved to be independent of one another with no correlation in the outputs.

This study also offers new and practical implications for presidential candidacy. Self-confidence is not a fixed trait of a candidate's psyche or personality; it is a coachable trait that can be shaped. Campaign teams can use the findings of this study to leverage a presidential candidate's persona to foster higher approval ratings and better public view of the candidate, which will create higher prospects of winning the office of the President of the United States.

One facet of psychoanalysis that the methodology of this study does not account for is body language or non-verbal communication. This is an area for future research can be done to

better at-a-distance models like this study. However, what this study does well is it provides more groundwork and it adds literature to the field of political leadership. It places a stronger need for the leadership development. For example, just like a pollster would be interested in how the public view a candidate or president's comprehension or acuity for foreign and domestic affairs, economics, business, diplomacy and public service, now leadership traits can be added to that list. These findings advance political psychology because it places a new-found importance on human-centered understanding of leadership just like there is an importance on policymaking and qualifications of the office of president. This study simply makes statistical room for leadership when strategizing for presidential candidacy.

The higher a president's self-confidence was, the higher their approval ratings were. These are important findings because they proved insight into leadership psychology by proving that individual psychological leadership traits manifest into real and measurable consequences to public approval. This study also provides new candidacy strategy because the self-confidence and apparent distrust can be coached.

This study also offers new and practical implications for presidential candidacy. Self-confidence and distrust are not fixed traits of a candidate's psyche or personality; they are coachable traits than can be shaped. Campaign teams can use the findings of this study to leverage a presidential candidate's persona to foster higher approval ratings and better public view of the candidate, which will create higher prospects of winning the office of the President of the United States.

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