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Personality Is the Main Issue Presidential Election-Outcome Forecasting

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As I write this in mid-November, the outcome of the 2000 presidential election still hangs in the balance as the nation awaits final results from the state of Florida. In stark contrast to the uncertainty surrounding the result of this closely contested race, various prognosticators and self-proclaimed pundits—myself included—confidently predicted a clear outcome to the contest.

At a March 6, 1999 meeting of the Psychohistory Forum (reported in [Why Al Gore will not be elected president in 2000](#), *Clio's Psyche*, Sept. 1999, pp. 73–75), 20 months before the election, I predicted Al Gore would fail in his bid for the presidency, “provided the Republicans field an outgoing, relatively extraverted, charismatic candidate.” Specifically, I contended that Vice President Gore’s conscientious, introverted personality pattern augured poorly for his candidacy “in an era where political campaigns are governed by saturation television coverage and the boundaries between leadership and celebrity have become increasingly blurred.”

In the other corner, seven academics at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in August [forecast a decisive win for Gore](#). Using predictor variables such as economic growth, the public’s perception of economic well-being, the popularity of the incumbent president, and the candidates’ standing in public opinion polls, six analysts forecast comfortable victory margins ranging from 52.3 to 55.4 percent of the major-party vote for Gore, while a seventh predicted a Gore landslide at 60.3 percent.

In retrospect, it appears that Bush’s *dispositional* advantage, as predicted, effectively cancelled out Gore’s considerable *situational* advantage. It follows that presidential forecasting models can be refined by acknowledging the pivotal role of personality in contemporary presidential campaigns, and entering it into the political-economic equation.

My interest in political personality assessment is not, however, limited to its potential as a part-predictor of election outcomes. Of much greater import,

personality foreshadows a candidate's presidential performance and proficiency as a campaigner. Briefly — and focusing only on their shortcomings, for illustrative purposes — here is how my personality-based predictions fared in anticipating the two major-party candidates' behavior during the 2000 presidential campaign.

In my March 1999 profile of Gore, I predicted that his “major personality-based limitations” would be “deficits in the important political skills of interpersonal, charisma, and spontaneity,” and that “moralistically conscientious features in his profile” incurred the risk of “alienating some constituencies.” That much was evident in the first presidential debate, which Gore won on raw debating points but lost in the court of public opinion. His debate performance, keenly parodied on NBC's “Saturday Night Live,” was widely perceived as supercilious and overbearing.

A critical determinant of whether people form positive or negative personal impressions hinges on their perception of others as warm and outgoing or as cold and retiring, and presidential politics on television plays a leading role in shaping those perceptions. Since the first televised presidential debates in 1960, with the exception of Richard Nixon, the more outgoing presidential candidate with the greatest personal charisma and publicly perceived warmth or likeability has won every election. Rightly or wrongly, voters tend to perceive the social reserve and emotional distance of introverted candidates as indifference and a lack of empathy, which elicits a reciprocal response to the candidate. The prototype

of the presidential candidate who fails to ignite the public's passion in an era of “made-for-television” elections is the conscientious introvert — a character type that has not occupied the Oval Office since Jimmy Carter and, before him, Herbert Hoover, Calvin Coolidge, and Woodrow Wilson.

In my September 1999 *Clio's Psyche* profile of George W. Bush ([The political personality of George W. Bush](#), pp. 75–76), I predicted that the Texas governor's “personality-based limitations include a propensity for superficial command of complex issues, a tendency to be easily bored by routine, a predisposition to act impulsively, and a predilection to favor personal connections, friendship, and loyalty over competence in staffing decisions and political appointments.”

This inference, too, was largely borne out in the course of the campaign. Indeed, the Gore campaign's most effective weapon against Bush in the run-up to the election was the charge that he lacked the capacity to be president — usually framed in terms of a lack of experience, stature, or readiness to lead the nation. And at least one commentator attributed Bush's occasional lapses on the stump to boredom with routine. As for impulsiveness, suffice it to say, “[major league](#)” (with apologies to *New York Times* reporter Adam Clymer).

Most telling, however, was the way Bush predictably stumbled into the pitfall of favoring personal connections and loyalty in his staffing decisions — a common theme among extraverted candidates. Surely Bush's selection of Dick Cheney as his running mate — the

very person charged by George W. to lead his vice-presidential search (and secretary of defense in his father's administration) — must count foremost in terms of Bush's personality-based predisposition to favor friendship and loyalty in his political appointments. The selection of Cheney may well turn out to have been a contributing factor should Bush lose an election as closely contested as this one, whereas Pennsylvania governor Tom Ridge may well have delivered his key battleground state to Bush.

Gore, in contrast, made a more calculated selection in his choice of Joe Lieberman as his running mate. As I wrote in an op-ed article last fall, "What Gore really needs is a running mate who can balance his personal deficits in the politically pivotal skills of easily connecting with people. ... Lieberman's disarmingly warm, engaging manner will stand the Democratic ticket in good stead" ([Vice-presidential nominee helps Gore more than Bush](#), *St. Cloud Times*, Sept. 10, 2000, p. 9B).

In closing, for Gore to have captured a slim majority of the popular vote is testimony not of his strength as a candidate, but of the strength of the economy and the collective contentment of the American people. Toward the end of the campaign, Gore seemed more animated and passionate, if not quite transcending his reputation for stiffness. But his performance in the first presidential debate, noted earlier, offers scant evidence of real personal growth in the course of the campaign — not unexpectedly, given the firm roots of his pedantic, moralistic manner in a deeply conscientious character structure.

Much the same can be said of Bush. Although he clearly honed his debating skills, his lack of candor about his 1976 arrest for driving while intoxicated could be indicative of the tendency for outgoing personalities to employ defensive dissociation: a failure to face up to unpleasant reality, accompanied by cosmetic image-making revealed in a succession of socially attractive but changing facades. Predictably, Bush was unable to overcome his "lack-of-gravitas" problem.

No matter who is ultimately declared the winner, the new president will face an uphill battle. Gore will likely have the harder time of it, on situational as well as dispositional grounds. Situationally, he could face narrow Republican majorities in both the House and Senate. Dispositionally, his relative introversion poses an obstacle to the kind of coalition building and forging of supportive relationships necessary for effectuating his policy initiatives. Although Bush for his part will be considerably hampered by the slender margins of the congressional Republican majorities, his less ideological, more conciliatory orientation will augment his outgoing, "retail" political skills, which could catalyze his capacity to consummate his policy objectives.

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