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*Foundations of Political Psychology*

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## **Can Personality and Politics Be Studied Systematically?**

**Fred I. Greenstein<sup>1</sup>**

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*The study of personality and politics is possible and desirable, but systematic intellectual progress is possible only if there is careful attention to problems of evidence, inference, and conceptualization. This essay reviews such problems, setting forth a conceptualization that takes account of, and builds on, many of the recurring reservations that are advanced about the utility of studying the personalities of political actors. In doing do, it takes selective account of the classical literature on political psychology and more recent developments in the field.*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The personalities of political actors impinge on political affairs in countless ways, often with great consequences. Political life regularly generates such contrary-to-fact conditionals as "If Kennedy had lived, such-and-such would or would not have happened." Counterfactual propositions are not directly testable, but many of them are so compelling that even the most cautious historian would find them persuasive. Most historians would agree, for example, that if the assassin's bullet aimed at President-Elect Franklin D. Roosevelt in February 1933 had found its mark, there would have been no New Deal, or if the Politburo had chosen another Leonid Brezhnev, Konstantin Chernenko, or Yuri Andropov rather than Mikhail Gorbachev as General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1985, the epochal changes of the late 1980s would not have occurred, at least not at the same time and in the same way.

The seemingly self-evident effects of many changes in leadership, including changes of a much lesser order in lesser entities than the national governments of

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the United States and the Soviet Union, along with the innumerable other events in the political world that are difficult to account for without taking cognizance of the actors' personal peculiarities, lead the bulk of nonacademic observers of politics, including journalists, to take it for granted that personality is an important determinant of political behavior. It may seem truisitic to those members of the scholarly community whose interests direct them to read a journal entitled *Political Psychology* that such lay political observers are correct and that there is need for systematic study of personality and politics. Yet it is rare in the larger scholarly community for specialists in the study of politics to make personality and politics a principal focus of investigation. Instead, they tend to concentrate on impersonal determinants of political events and outcomes, even those in which the participants themselves believe personality to have been significant. Or, if they do treat individual action as important, they posit rationality, defining away personal characteristics and presuming that the behavior of actors can be deduced from the logic of their situations (cf. Simon, 1985).

My argument in this paper is that the study of personality and politics is possible and desirable, but that systematic intellectual progress is possible only if there is self-conscious attention to evidence, inference, and conceptualization. In setting that argument forth, I build on, augment, and modify my previous writings on problems of explanation in political psychology (Greenstein, 1969, 1975), selectively incorporating later scholarship, particularly the extensive work in recent years on political cognition. My formulation builds on the very controversies that often impede the study of personality and politics.

The study of personality and politics sometimes appears to have more critics than practitioners. Some of the controversy is no more than the usual methodological and empirical disagreements within the ranks of those who seek to unravel a complex and varied real-world phenomenon, but the most important disagreements for the purposes of this essay are over whether in principle there is a need for the study of personality and politics, and, if so, what the scope of such study might be.

Reservations have been expressed about the utility of studying the personalities of political actors on the grounds that (1) political actors are randomly distributed in roles and therefore their personalities "cancel out"; (2) political action is determined more by the actors' political environments than by their own characteristics; (3) the particular stratum of the psyche many political scientists equate with *personality*, psychodynamics and the ego defenses, does not have much of a political impact; (4) the social characteristics of political actors are more important than their psychological characteristics; and (5) individuals are typically unable to have much effect on political outcomes. On analysis, each of these reservations or disagreements proves to have important conceptual implications for the study of personality and politics. The debate about scope has roots in the definitional ambiguity of the basic terms *personality* and *politics* and is best

dealt with before the objections and their positive implications for systematic inquiry.

### DEFINITIONAL QUESTIONS

Narrowly construed, the term *politics in personality and politics* refers to the politics most often studied by political scientists—that of civil government and of the extra-governmental processes that more or less directly impinge upon government, such as political parties and interest groups. Broadly construed, it refers to politics in all of its manifestations, whether in government or any other institution, including many that are rarely studied by political scientists—for example, the family, school, and workplace. By this broader construction, the common denominator is the various referents of *politics*, including the exercise of influence and authority and the diverse arts of interpersonal maneuver, such as bargaining and persuasion, connoted by the word *politicking*, none of which are monopolized by government.

*Personality* also admits of narrow and broad definitions. In the narrow usage typical of political science, it excludes political attitudes and opinions and often other kinds of subjective states that are of a political nature (for example, the ideational content associated with political skill) and applies only to non-political personal differences, or even to the subset of psychopathological differences that are the preoccupation of clinical psychology. In psychology, on the other hand, the term has a much broader referent—in the phrase of the personality theorist Henry Murray (1968), it “is the most comprehensive term we have in psychology.” Thus, in their influential study of *Opinions and Personality*, the psychologists M. Brewster Smith, Jerome Bruner, and Robert White (1956, p. 1) use a locution one would not expect from political scientists, describing opinions as “an integral part of personality.”

Although usage is a matter of convention and both the narrow and the broad definitions encompass phenomena worthy of study, this seemingly semantic controversy has a significant bearing on what scholars study. As Lasswell (1930, p. 42–45) argued long ago, there are distinct advantages to adopting the broader definition. A perspective that transcends governmental politics encourages study of comparable phenomena, some of which may happen to be part of the formal institutions of governance and some of which may not. Browning and Jacobs (1964), for example, compared the needs for power, achievement, and affiliation of businessmen and public officials in highly diverse positions that imposed sharply divergent demands: They found that the public officials were by no means all cut from the same psychological cloth, but that there were important similarities between certain of the public officials and businessmen. The underlying principle appears to be that personality tends to be consistent with the specific

demands of roles, whether because of preselection of the role incumbents or because of in-role socialization.

## THE DISTRIBUTION OF INDIVIDUALS IN ROLES

Even if the first of the reservations sometimes expressed about the value of studying personality and politics—the claim that individuals are randomly distributed in political roles and therefore their impact is somewhat neutralized—is empirically sound, it is by no means a reason not to study personality and politics. If one visualizes political processes as analogous to intricately wired computers, political actors can be viewed as key junctures in the wiring, for example circuit breakers. If anything, it would be *more*, not less, urgent to know the performance characteristics of the circuit breakers if their operating properties were random, with some capable of tripping at inappropriate times, losing valuable information, and others failing to trip, exposing the system to the danger of meltdown.

In the real political world, events sometimes do more or less randomly assign individuals with unanticipated personal styles and proclivities to political roles, often with significant consequences. This was the case of two of the national leaders referred to in the opening of the article: neither Franklin Roosevelt's or Mikhail Gorbachev's contemporaries anticipated the innovative leadership they displayed in office. As the Browning and Jacobs study suggests, however, people do not appear to be randomly distributed in political roles, though the patterns of their distribution appear to be complex and elusive. Ascertaining them, examining their political consequences and determining the "fit" between role and personality are important parts of the intellectual agenda for the study of personality and politics (George, 1974).

## PERSONALITY AND ENVIRONMENT

The second reservation about the study of personality and politics—that environment has more impact than personality on behavior—and the other three reservations need to be considered in the context of a general clarification of the types of variables that in principle can affect personality and politics and their possible interconnections. An important example of such a clarification is M. Brewster Smith's (1968) well-known "map for the study of personality and politics." [See also Stone and Schaffner's (1988, p. 33) depiction of "political life space."] The representation that I will employ (Greenstein, 1975) is introduced in segments in Figs. 1 and 2 and set forth in its entirety in Fig. 3.

The most fundamental distinction in the map is the rudimentary one that, as

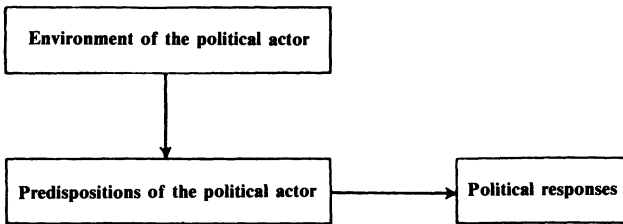


Fig. 1. Basic antecedents of political behavior:  $E \rightarrow P \rightarrow R$ .

Kurt Lewin (1936, p. 11–12) put it, “behavior or any kind of mental event . . . depends on the state of the person and at the same time on the environment.” Figure 1 depicts the links between the two broad classes of behavioral antecedent Lewin refers to and behavior itself, using the terminology of Lasswell and Kaplan (1950, pp. 4–6), who ground an entire conceptual framework for the analysis of politics on the equation that human response (R) is a function of the respondent’s environment (E) and predispositions (P):  $E \rightarrow P \rightarrow R$ . Here again, terminology is a matter of convenience. Instead of *predispositions*, it would have been possible to use many other of the 80 terms Donald Campbell (1963) enumerates in his account of the logic of studying “acquired behavioral dispositions.” Such terms as *situation*, *context*, and *stimulus* are common alternative labels for all or part of the environment of human action.

The  $E \rightarrow P \rightarrow R$  formula provides a convenient way of visualizing the fallacy in the claim that behavior is so much a function of environments that individuals’ predispositions need not be studied (reservation two). In fact, environments are always mediated by the individuals on whom they act; environments cannot shape behavior directly, and much politically important action is not reactive to immediate stimuli. Indeed, the capacity to be *proactive* (Murray, 1968) and transcend existing perceptions of what the environment dictates is at the core of effective leadership. But the debate about whether environments determine political behavior is a reminder of the endless interplay of individuals and the political contexts in which they find or place themselves.

Some contexts are indeed associated with the kind of behavior that leads social determinists to be skeptical about the need to study personality. Informed of the impending collapse of a building, everyone—irrespective of temperament and personality type—will seek to leave it. Other contexts illustrate Gordon Allport’s (1937, p. 325) aphorism that “the same heat that hardens the egg, melts the butter.” Still others are virtual ink blots, leading individuals with varying characteristics to project their inner dispositions onto them. The connection between personality and context is so integral that this relationship has become the basis of an important approach to personality theory known as interactionism (Endler, 1981; Magnusson & Endler, 1977; Pervin & Lewis, 1978). By systemat-

ically analyzing personality and politics in interactional terms, the analyst is sensitized to the kinds of contingent relationships that make the links between personality and politics elusive.

A good example of a contingent relationship in which the impact of personality is mediated by the environment is to be found in the work of Katz and Benjamin (1960) on the effects of authoritarianism in biracial work groups in the North and the South. Katz and Benjamin compared white undergraduates in the two regions who scored low and high on one of the various authoritarian personality measures to see how they comported themselves in interracial problem-solving groups. They found that in the South authoritarianism (which previous studies showed to be associated with race prejudice) was associated with attempts of white students to dominate their black counterparts, but that in the North the authoritarians were more likely than the nonauthoritarians to be *deferential* to blacks. The investigators' conclusion was that the sociopolitical environment of the Southern authoritarians enabled them to give direct vent to their impulses, but that the liberal environment of the Northern university led students with similar proclivities to go out of their way to avoid coming in conflict with the prevailing norms.

The relative effect of environment and personality on political behavior varies. Ambiguous environments—for example, new situations and political roles that are only sketchily defined by formal rules (Budner, 1962; Greenstein, 1969, pp. 50–57)—provide great latitude for actors' personalities to shape their behavior. Structured environments—for example, bureaucratized settings and contexts in which there are well-developed and widely known and accepted norms—tend to constrain behavior. The environment also is likely to account for much of the variance in political behavior when strong sanctions are attached to certain possible courses of action.

The dramatic reduction of political repression in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the late 1980s led to an outpouring of political action. Just as the absence of authoritarian rule leads individuals in the aggregate to express their personal political proclivities, its presence magnifies the effects of leaders, assuming that the authoritarian system is one in which the individual or individuals at the top have more or less absolute power (Tucker, 1965). The striking capacity of leaders' personalities to shape events in an authoritarian system was evident in the leeway Gorbachev appears to have had at the time of the initiation of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, if not later when the forces of pluralism began to bedevil him.

Just as environments vary in the extent to which they foster the expression of individual variability, so also do predispositions themselves vary. There is an extensive literature on the tendency of people to subordinate themselves to groups and consciously or unconsciously suppress their own views when they are in the company of others. But some individuals are remarkably resistant to such

inhibitions and others have compliant tendencies (Allen, 1975; Asch, 1956; Janis, 1982). The intensity of psychological predispositions promotes expression of them. Most people suppress their impulses to challenge the regimes of authoritarian systems, but those with passionate convictions and strong character-based needs for self-expression or rebellion are more likely to oppose such regimes. (In doing so, they alter the environment, providing social support for their more compliant fellows to join them.)

### PSYCHOPATHOLOGICAL AND OTHER POLITICAL MOTIVATION

One of the ways in which humans vary is in the extent to which they manifest emotional disturbance and ego defensiveness. Equating all of personality with the psychological stratum that traditionally concerns clinical psychologists, some students of politics voice the third of the reservations about the study of personality and politics, arguing that the links between psychopathology and politics are rare and unimportant. A specific exploration of the general question of whether ego-defense motivation is common in politics can be found in the extensive empirical literature on the student political protest movements of the 1960s. Some research findings appeared to indicate that protest was rooted in “healthy” character traits, such as inner strength to stand by one’s convictions

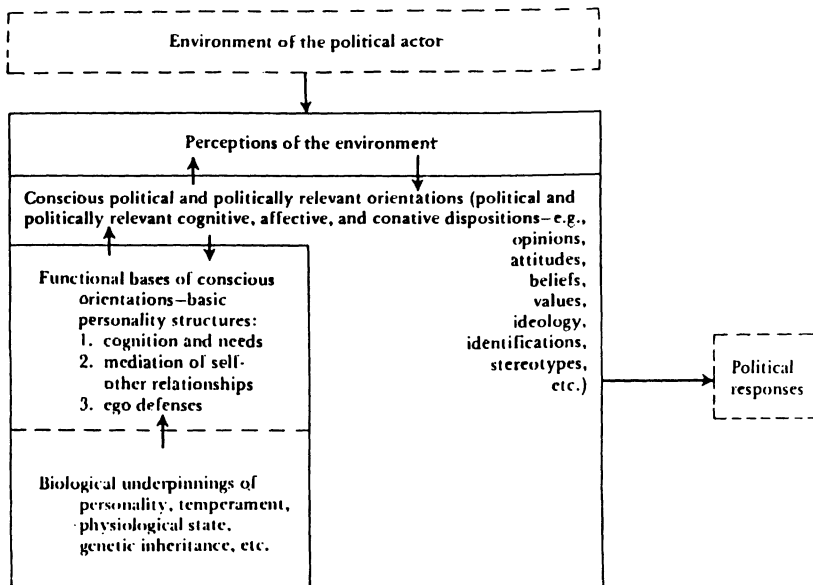


Fig. 2. Predispositions of the political actor.



and the cognitive capacity to cut through propaganda, whereas other reports suggested the possible influence of the kinds of neurotic needs that might, for example, arise from repressed resentment of parents or other everyday-life authority figures.

In order to consider the general issue of the role of psychopathology in politics and the specific issue of the roots of protest, it is necessary to elaborate the  $E \rightarrow P \rightarrow R$  formula. Figure 2 expands the personality panel in Fig. 1. The panel is constructed so as to suggest, in a metaphor common in personality theory (Hall and Lindzey, 1970), "levels" of psychic functioning. The level closest to the surface and most directly "in touch" with the environment is the perceptual. Perceptions can be thought of as a cognitive screen that shapes and structures environmental stimuli, sometimes distorting them, sometimes reflecting them with considerable verisimilitude. In the 1970s and 1980s there was burgeoning inquiry into political perception and cognitive psychology more generally (Jervis, 1976; Jervis *et al.*, 1985; Lau & Sears, 1986; Vertzberger, 1990). Also at the surface, in the sense that they are conscious or accessible to consciousness, are political orientations such as attitudes, beliefs and convictions. Psychologists commonly conceive of dispositions at this level as composites of the more basic processes of cognition (thought), affect (emotion), and conation (proclivities toward action).

The subpanel of Fig. 2 labeled "functional bases of conscious orientations" and, more or less synonymously, "basic personality structures," represents the level of psychic activity that political scientists often have in mind when they speak of personality. Different personality theorists emphasize the importance of different underlying personality structures, but most of them distinguish (in varied terminology) three broad classes of inner processes—those bearing on thought and perception, on emotions and their management (including feelings of which the individual may have little conscious understanding) and on the relation of the self to significant others. The terms used for these processes in Fig. 2 are *cognition*, *ego defense* and *mediation of self-other relations*. Figure 2 also includes a subpanel identifying the genetic and acquired physical states that contribute to personality and diffuse into political behavior (Masters, 1989; Park, 1986).

Both the broad question of whether psychopathology manifests itself in political behavior and the narrow question of what motivates political rebels can be illuminated by reference to Fig. 2. One way of thinking about political attitudes and behavior is in terms of the functions they serve for the personality (Pratkanis *et al.*, 1989; Smith *et al.*, 1956)—hence the use of the phrase "functional bases of conscious orientations." What might on the surface seem to be the same belief or class of action, may serve different functions in the motivational economies of different people. For one individual a certain view—for example, a

positive or negative racial stereotype—may result from the available information in the environment, mainly serving needs for cognitive closure. For another, the view might be rooted in a need to take cues from (or be different from) significant others. For a third, it might serve the ego-defensive function of venting unacknowledged aggressive impulses. (More often than not, a political behavior is likely to be fueled by more than one motivation but with varying mixes from individual to individual.)

The incidence of psychopathological and other motivational bases of political orientations needs to be established by empirical inquiry. Just as some environmental contexts leave room for the play of personality in general, some are especially conducive to the expression of ego defenses. These include stimuli that appeal to the powerful emotional impulses that people are socialized to deny but that remain potent beneath the surface. There is an especially steamy quality to political contention over issues that bear on sexuality like abortion and pornography. Nationalistic issues such as flag burning and matters of religious doctrine also channel political passions (Davies, 1980), for reasons that have not been adequately explained. Extreme forms of behavior are also likely (though not certain) to have a pathological basis, as in the behavior of American presidential assassins such as Ronald Reagan's would-be killer, John Hinckley, Jr. (Clarke, 1990).

The circumstances under which psychopathology and its lesser variants find their way into politics are of great interest, as are those under which the other motivational bases of political behavior come into play. Depending upon the basic personality systems to which a given aspect of political performance is linked, differences can be expected in the conditions under which it will be aroused and changed, as well as in the detailed way it will manifest itself. Opinions and actions based in cognitive needs will be responsive to new information. Those based on social needs will respond to changes in the behavior and signals provided by significant others. Those based on ego defenses may be intractable, or only subject to change by extensive efforts to bring about self-insight, or by certain manipulative strategies such as suggestion by authority figures (Katz, 1960).

The functional approach to the study of political orientations provides a useful framework for determining whether and under what circumstances political protest has motivational sources in ego-defensive needs. There is much evidence bearing on this issue, at least as it applies to student protest. A remarkable number of empirical studies were done of student protest activity of the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States and elsewhere, no doubt because that activity occurred in contexts where numerous social scientists were available to conduct research. A huge literature ensued, abounding in seemingly contradictory findings, many of which, however, appear to fit into a quite plausible larger

pattern, once one takes account of the diversity of the institutions in which protest was studied and of the particular periods in the cycle of late-1960s and early 1970s student protest in which the various studies were conducted.

The earliest student protests of the 1960s occurred in colleges and universities with meritocratic admissions policies and upper-middle-class student bodies. The first studies of this period, those by Flacks (1967) of University of Chicago students, suggested that student protest was largely a cognitive manifestation—the response of able students to the perceived iniquities of their political environment. Later analyses of data collected in the same period on similar populations (students at the University of California, Berkeley) suggested a more complex pattern in which some of the activists did seem to have the cognitive strengths and preoccupations that Flacks had argued were the mark of *all* of them, but others appeared to be channeling ego-defensive needs (based in troubled parent-child relations) into their protest behavior. The students whom the later analysts concluded had ego-defensive motivations and those who they concluded were acting out of cognitive needs showed different patterns of protest behavior, the first directing their activity only on the issues of national and international politics, the second taking part in local reform activities (Block *et al.*, 1969).

The psychological correlates of student activism changed over time in the United States, as activism became transformed from the activity of a few students in the “elite” universities to a widespread form of behavior, which at the time of the Nixon administration’s incursion into Cambodia and the killing of student protesters at Kent State University manifested itself on virtually every American college and university campus. Studies conducted at that time found little evidence that protesters had distinctive distinguishing characteristics (Dunlap, 1970; Peterson & Bilorusky, 1971).

### **PERSONALITY, HISTORICAL CONTEXT, AND SOCIAL BACKGROUND**

Variation according to historical context and change over time are so important in determining how personality becomes linked with politics that the map around which this article is organized needs to be expanded, as it is in Fig. 3, which encompasses the time dimension and differentiates the immediate and remote features of the political environment. Figure 3 suggests that the fourth reservation about the utility of studying personality and politics—the claim that social backgrounds are more important than psychological characteristics—is grounded in a confusion which can be readily dissolved. The social backgrounds of political actors (panel 2 of Fig. 3) influence their actions but only as mediated by the individual’s developing predispositions (panel 3) and the different levels

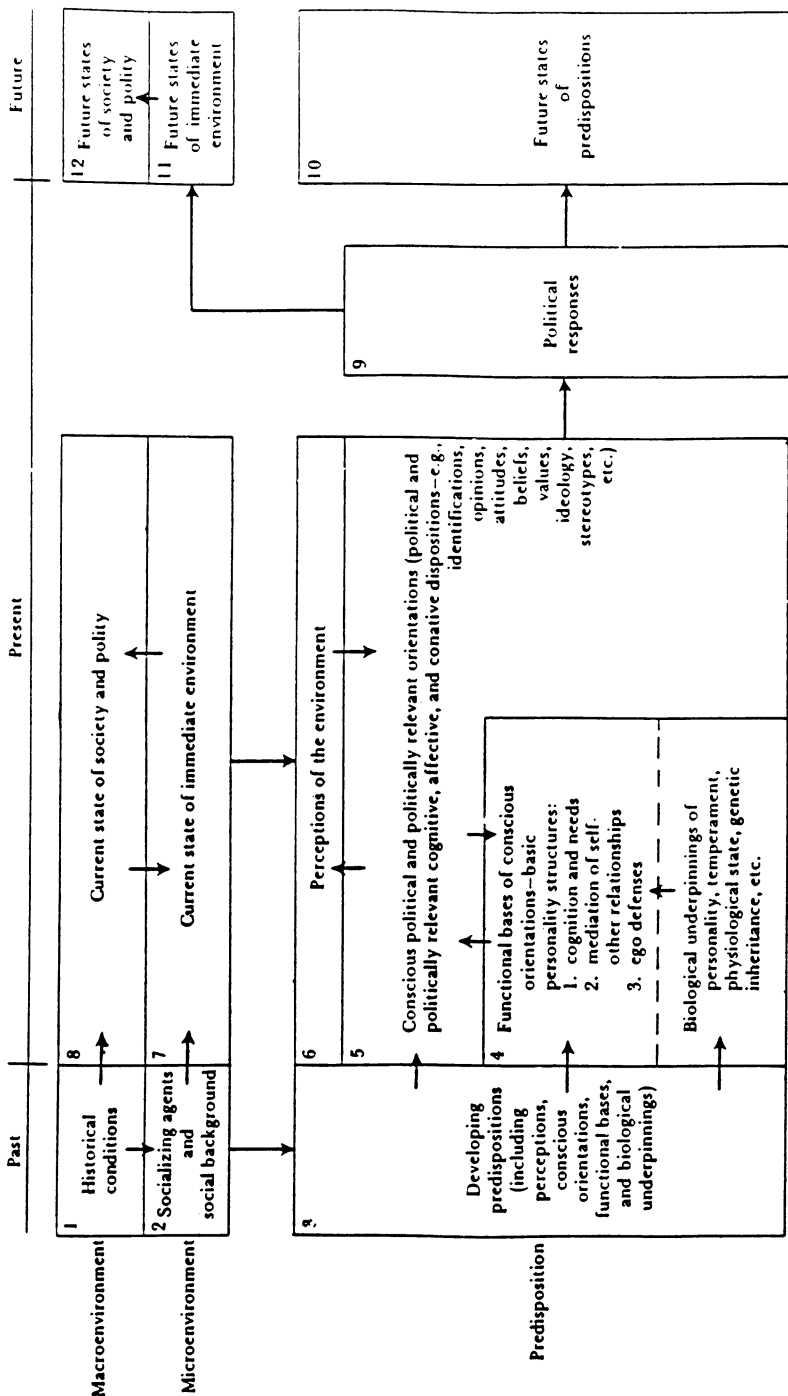


Fig. 3. A comprehensive map for the analysis of personality and politics.

of personality they shape (panels 4, 5, and 6). Thus, to take a final example from the literature on student protest in the 1960s, it was (as Block *et al.*, 1969, pointed out at the time) fallacious for Lipset (1968) to argue that because so many student activists were young, middle-class Jews, personality was not an important determinant of activism. To the extent that Jewish background was connected with activism, it had to be part of a causal sequence in which developmental experiences specific to Jews contributed to their psychological orientations. The latter, not Jewish background *per se*, would have been the mediator of behavior.

The study of how ethnicity, class, and other of the so-called background characteristics affect political behavior is important and highly relevant to (but no substitute for) the study of personality and politics. To the extent that a characteristic becomes part of an actor's personal make-up, it is no longer "background"—it is an element of the psyche. But evidence about whether background experience distinguishes members of one social group from those of others is grist for political psychologists. Lipset may have been correct in sensing that Jewish political activists of the 1960s had some distinctive qualities that were important for their behavior. The observation that many student protesters were Jewish not only fails to prove this, but also forecloses systematic inquiry.

An appropriate program of inquiry into Lipset's claim would entail specifying the precise psychological dynamics that ostensibly make Jewish protesters distinctive and comparing Jewish and non-Jewish protesters with comparable nonprotesters in order to determine whether the imputed patterns existed. If they did, one would want to know whether they resulted from particular developmental histories, whether they had predictable consequences for political behavior, and why some Jews protested and some did not. Whether a distinctly Jewish psychology of political protest exists is an empirical question and is part of a broader set of questions that can be asked about how group membership affects personality and political behavior.

## THE IMPACT OF PERSONALITY ON EVENTS

The last of the reservations about the study of personality and politics derives from the view that individuals are not likely to have much impact on events. Such a premise underlies many theories of history. In the 19th century the question of whether historical actors have an impact on events was the basis of a fruitless grand controversy, with such social determinists as Herbert Spencer denying the efficacy of historical actors and such Great Man theorists as Thomas Carlyle proclaiming their overriding importance (Kellerman, 1986, pp. 3–57). Contemporary leadership theorists typically describe themselves as interactionists, emphasizing the interdependence of leaders and their environments and

the contingent nature of the leader's impact on larger events (Burns, 1978; Tucker, 1981).

The debate about whether actors can shape events concerns the causal chain from personality (panels 4–6 of Fig. 3), through political response (panel 9), to future states of the immediate and more remote political and social environment (panels 11 and 12). Claims that a particular actor's personality did or did not affect a particular historical outcome usually prove to be claims about *action dispensability* and *actor dispensability* (Greenstein, 1969, pp. 40–46)—that is, about whether the outcome in question would have taken place in the absence of that individual's actions and whether the actions in question were ones that any similarly placed actor would have taken. The second issue is one I have already explored under the heading of personality and environment. The first requires clarification.

The capacity of actors to shape events is a variable not a constant. The sources of variation are parallel to the determinants of success in the game of pool. The number of balls a player will be able to sink is in part a function of the location of the balls on the table. The parallel in politics is the malleability of the political environment (Burke & Greenstein, 1989, p. 24). The second determinant of success in the pool room is the position of the cue ball. This is analogous to the actor's position in the relevant political context. Roosevelt and Gorbachev could not have had an impact from lower-level administrative positions. The third class of variable has the same labels in the games of pool and politics—skill, self-confidence, and the other personal requisites of effective performance.

## PERSONALITY THEORY, ROLE, CULTURE

The distinctions summarized in Fig. 3 represent many of the basic categories in the multitude of personality theories that offer partial visions of psychic structure and function. The seeming Babel of competing personality theories and alternative nomenclatures conceals basic commonalities: all theories necessarily take cognizance that humans are thinking, feeling creatures who exist in social environments and have inner qualities that shape their response to those environments.

Beyond that, personality theories differ from one another in what they emphasize. The various personality theorists—Freud, Jung, Allport, Murray, and the many others—differ in the extent to which they emphasize one class of motivation over another, in their sensitivity to the individual's environment, in the weight they put on biology, in the extent to which they view personality to be structured and in many other respects. For the present purposes it is not appropriate to recommend a particular personality theory. The advice Hall and Lindzey (1970, p. 602) offer all students of personality is equally sound for students of

personality and politics. After becoming broadly acquainted with the field of personality, become immersed in a particular personality theory and “wallow in it, revel in it, absorb it, learn it thoroughly, and think that it is the best possible way to conceive of behavior,” but “reserve in one small corner of [the] mind the reservation that the final crucible for any theory is the world of reality studied under controlled conditions.” Then “set about the cold hard business of investigation.”

Figure 3 does not make explicit provision for two important concepts for the student of political psychology—role and culture. What is their conceptual standing? The first of these terms has already appeared with some regularity in this paper. It is difficult to envisage an extended discussion of political psychology that does not take account of the way political actors perform their roles, and of the fit between role and personality and related matters. Yet, as Levinson (1959) shows, the referents of *role* are systematically ambiguous. Sometimes the term is used to refer to political behavior itself (Figure 3, panel 9), as in “His role in the Cuban Missile Crisis was critical.” Sometimes it refers to the expectations in an individual’s environment about what behavior is appropriate for someone filling that individual’s position, in which case the referent would be mapped in panels 7 and 8 of Fig. 3. And sometimes the term refers to the role-incumbent’s own assumptions about what the role entails (panel 5). As long as the referent is specified, an investigator may use the term in any of these senses, depending on his or her theoretical assumptions and concerns. Indeed, the mere act of recognizing the diversity of meaning may suggest fruitful hypotheses—for example, about whether and to what extent incumbents in particular roles and the individuals with whom they interact have shared conceptions of what the roles entail.

If the term *role* is ambiguous, *culture* is ambiguous run riot (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952; Merelman, 1984). A simple solution would be to conceive of the term as the counterpart at the collective level to personality at the individual level. If personality is used as an omnibus term to encompass the various elements of an individual’s subjectivity, *culture* then would be used to encompass those elements at the collective level for societies, polities, and lesser entities. In Fig. 3, the referent would be the environmental panels (7 and 8). Such a usage, however, would leave no referent for terms like “acculturate,” which refer to the individual’s incorporation of cultural norms and assumptions. And it would bypass the issues that make *culture* such a protean term to begin with—for example, the debates about whether cultures are marked by structure and about what kinds of orientations are and are not parts of a culture. (If the term is simply synonymous with public opinion, it is redundant.) As with *role*, there seems to be no single usage that will command agreement. Because the various usages refer to different (and, in many cases, potentially interesting) phenomena, it is essential for investigators to specify the sense in which they are using the term.

## KINDS OF PERSONALITY AND POLITICS ANALYSIS

Every human being is in certain ways like all other human beings, in certain ways more like some human beings than others, and in certain ways unique (Kluckhohn & Murray, 1953). Each of these resemblances is reflected in an analytically distinct kind of personality-and-politics analysis. The universality of human qualities is explored in writings that seek in some broad way to make the connection stated in the title of Graham Wallas' *Human Nature and Politics* (1908). Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (1941), Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death* (1959) and Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1966) are notable contributions to this tradition. At their best such works provide fascinating and provocative perspectives on the human condition. Many of them are rich in insights that suggest testable hypotheses.

Because they seek to explain the variable phenomena of political behavior with a constant, such efforts are not themselves subject to confirmation or disconfirmation. In contrast, it is possible to conduct systematic, replicable inquiries into political actors' unique qualities (*single-case analysis*) and the qualities that make them more like some individuals than others (*typological analysis*). The ways in which individual and typical political psychology affects the performance of political processes and institutions (*aggregation*) can also be studied systematically.<sup>2</sup>

Single-case personality analysis is more important in the field of personality and politics than it has come to be in personality psychology generally because students of politics are concerned with the performance of specific leaders and their impact on events. There have been noteworthy personality-and-politics studies of leaders as diverse in time, culture and circumstances of their leadership as Martin Luther (Erikson, 1958), Louis XII (Marvick, 1986), Woodrow Wilson (George & George, 1964), Kemal Ataturk (Volkan & Itzkowitz, 1984) and Josef Stalin (Tucker, 1973), as well as many others. There also have been valuable single-case psychological analyses of figures whose political importance derives from their impact on leaders—for example, George and George's analysis (1964) of the influence of Colonel Edward House on Woodrow Wilson and Kull's (1988) of defense policy advisers. In addition, there is a tradition in the field of personality and politics of single-case analyses of "faces in the crowd"—people who are without policy influence but who illustrate in depth the psychological process that can only be examined more superficially in surveys (Riesman & Glazer, 1952; Smith *et al.*, 1956; Lane, 1962).

<sup>2</sup>It should be stressed that although types of personality-and-politics inquiry can be distinguished analytically, a comprehensive analysis of some real-world political phenomenon—for example, presidential leadership—is likely to draw on more than one kind of analysis.



Typological study of political and other actors is of potentially great importance: if political actors fall into types with known characteristics and propensities, the laborious task of analyzing them *de novo* can be obviated, and uncertainty is reduced about how they will perform in particular circumstances. The notion of a psychological *type* can be stretched to include all efforts to categorize and compare the psychology of political actors, even straightforward classifications of the members of a population in terms of whether they are high or low on some trait such as ego strength, self-esteem, or tolerance of ambiguity. The more full-blown political psychology typologies parallel diagnostic categories in medicine and psychiatry. They identify syndromes—patterns of observable characteristics that reflect identifiable underlying conditions, result from distinctive developmental histories, and have predictable consequences.

Of the many studies that employ the first, simpler kind of psychological categorization, the studies by Herbert McClosky and his students are particularly valuable because of their theoretical and methodological sophistication and the importance of the issues they address (e.g., Di Palma & McClosky, 1970; McClosky, 1967; McClosky & Zaller, 1984; Sniderman, 1974). Political personality typologies of the second, more comprehensive variety go back at least to Plato's account in the eighth and ninth books of *The Republic* of the aristocrat, the democrat, the timocrat and the tyrant—political types that Plato believed were shaped in an intergenerational dialectic of rebellion of sons against their fathers' perceived shortcomings. [For a gloss on Plato's account, see Lasswell (1960).] Latter-day typologies that have generated important bodies of literature are the authoritarian, dogmatic, and Machiavellian personality classifications (Adorno *et al.*, 1950; Christie & Geis, 1970; Rokeach, 1960).

Within political science, the best-known personality typology has been James David Barber's (1985) classification of the character structures of American presidents. Within psychology, the best-known has been that of the authoritarian personality. Both typologies have engendered methodological controversies that for a time, at least, threatened to submerge the insights in the works in which they were originally set forth (George, 1974; Kirscht & Dillehay, 1967), but both contain important insights and may eventually stimulate cumulative bodies of scholarship.

This can occur even after a long dormant period, as can be seen by the tangled history of studies of authoritarianism. By the late 1960s, the massive literature exploring the implications of that construct appeared to be at a dead end. But in the 1980s an ingenious and rigorous program of inquiry by Altemeyer (1981, 1988) furnished persuasive empirical evidence that the original authoritarian construct was an approximation of an important political-psychological regularity—the existence in some individuals of an inner makeup that disposes them to defer to authority figures.

Single-case and typological studies alike make inferences about the inner

quality of human beings (panels 4, 5, and 6) from outer manifestations—their past and present environments (panels 1, 2, 7, and 8) and the pattern over time of their political responses (panel 9). They then use those inferred constructs to account for the same kind of phenomena from which they were inferred—responses in situational contexts. The danger of circularity is obvious, but tautology can be avoided by reconstructing personality from some response patterns and using the reconstruction to explain others.

The failure of some investigators to take such pains contributes to the controversial status of the personality-and-politics literature, as does the prevalence of certain other practices. Some biographers, for example, impose diagnostic labels on their subject, rather than presenting a systematic account of the subject's behavior in disparate circumstances (George, 1971). Some typological analysts categorize their subjects without providing the detailed criteria and justifications for doing so. Some analysts of individuals as well as of types have engaged in the fallacy of observing a pattern of behavior and simply attributing it to a particular developmental pattern, without documenting causality, and perhaps even without providing evidence that the pattern existed. Finally, some analysts commit what might be called the psychologizing and clinical fallacies: they explain behavior in terms of personality without considering possible situational determinants, or conclude that it is driven by psychopathology without considering other psychological determinants, such as cognition. Both fallacies were evident in a body of literature attributing the high scores of poor blacks and other minorities on the paranoia scale of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) to emotional disturbance. The scores appear actually to have reflected cognitively based responses to the vicissitudes of the ghetto environment (Gynther, 1972; Newhill, 1990).

It is not surprising that some personality-and-politics studies are marked by methodological shortcomings. Certain of the inferences mapped in Figure 3 pose intrinsic difficulties. Claims about the determinants of personality characteristics (that is, of the connections between panels 1 and 2 and panels 3–6) are unlikely to be conclusive. Characterizations of personality structures themselves are never wholly persuasive, if only because of the absence of uniformly accepted personality theories with agreed-upon terminologies. Fortunately, the variables depicted in Figure 3 that *can* be characterized with great confidence are those closest to and therefore most predictive of behavior: the environments in which political action occurs (panels 7 and 8) and the patterns that action manifests over time (panels 9, 10, etc.). Those patterns are themselves variables, and they can be treated as indicators of an important further dimension of personality and politics—*political style*.

Two examples of political biographies that provide impressively comprehensive accounts of the precise patterns of their subjects' behavior are Walter's study of Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam (1980) and Landis's (1987)

of Senator Joseph McCarthy. Richard Christie's (Christie & Geis, 1970) studies of the types of people who manifest the Machiavellian syndrome—the characterological proclivity to manipulate others—provide a model of careful measurement and theoretically sophisticated analysis in which contingent relationships are carefully explored. People who score high on tests of Machiavellianism do not differ in their behavior from non-Machiavellians in all contexts, only in contexts in which their manipulative impulses can be effective—for example, in situations that permit improvisation and in situations requiring face-to-face interaction.

Personality is likely to interest most political scientists only if it has aggregate consequences for political institutions, processes, and outcomes. The literature on the aggregate effects of personality on politics is varied because the processes of aggregation are varied. Broadly speaking, political psychology affects the performance of political systems and processes through the activities of members of the public and the deliberations and decision-making of leaders. The impact of mass publics on politics, except through elections and severe perturbations of public opinion, is partial and often elusive. On the other hand, the political impact of leaders and others in the active political stratum, more generally is direct, readily evident, and potentially momentous in its repercussions.

The first efforts to understand the psychology of mass populations go back to the accounts by writers in the ancient world, such as Tacitus, of the character of the inhabitants of remote tribes and nations. Such disquisitions are an antecedent of the vexed post-World War II national character literature in which often ill-documented ethnographic reports and cultural artifacts such as child-rearing manuals, films, and popular fiction were used to draw sweeping conclusions about modal national character traits. That literature came therefore to be known to students of politics mainly for its methodological shortcomings, but it anticipated later, more systematic studies of political culture (Inkeles & Levinson, 1967; Inkeles, 1983).

By the 1950s, there was broad scholarly consensus that it is inappropriate simply to attribute psychological characteristics to mass populations on the basis of anecdotal or indirect evidence. Direct assessment of publics through survey research became the dominant mode of studying mass populations. Studies like those of McClosky and his associates provide survey data on basic personality processes such as ego-defenses and cognitive styles and how they affect political opinion. But basic personality processes have not been persuasively linked to the aspect of mass behavior that most clearly and observably has an impact on political institutions and processes—electoral choice. Most members of the general public appear to be too weakly involved in electoral politics for their voting choices to tap deeper psychological roots, and many of those who are involved appear to take their cues from party identifications formed in their early years and short-run situational stimuli.

If what is commonly thought of as personality is not linked to electoral choice, attitudinal political psychology most definitely is. The literature on electoral choice (Niemi & Weisberg, 1984) is too vast to begin to review here, but the research of Kelley (1983) is of particular interest in that it is explicitly aggregative; it reveals the precise distributions of attitudes and beliefs about issues and candidates that were associated with post-World War II American election outcomes. So is the research of Converse and Pierce (1986), who have convincingly linked certain attributes of the French political system to the distinctive ways members of that nation's electorate orient themselves to political parties.

In contrast to the ambiguous links between mass publics and political outcomes other than elections, the connections between political decision-makers and political outcomes are direct and palpable. Nevertheless, many historical reconstructions of political decision-making are insufficiently specific about which actors in what precise contexts took which actions with what consequences. Sometimes the historical record does not contain the appropriate data. Often, however, the difficulty is not with the record but with the way it has been analyzed.

The questions the analyst needs to ask of an historical record are suggested by two of the analytic distinctions introduced above—*action dispensibility* and *actor dispensibility*. Establishing whether an individual's actions were necessary for a particular outcome to have taken place calls for reconstructing the determinants of the outcome, asking whether it would have occurred if the actions of the individual in question had not occurred. Establishing whether that individual's personality shaped the outcome calls for a different and more complex reconstruction that asks whether the situation of the actor in question would have imposed the same course of action on anyone who might plausibly have occupied that individual's position. This calls for examining not only the psychology of the individual in question, but also the historical context, including the other significant actors and their claims, demands, perceptions, and personal qualities.

A good example of an historical reconstruction that addresses both issues is the analysis by George and George of Woodrow Wilson's role in the crisis over ratification of the Versailles Treaty. The intense, uncompromising qualities of Wilson the man, at least in certain kinds of conflicts, are an essential part of any account of the ratification fight. There is abundant evidence that the political context did not impose a course of action on Wilson that would have kept him from achieving his goal of ratification. All that was required was that he accept certain nominal compromises that his supporters urged upon him, pointing out that they had no practical significance. Moreover, Wilson's actions are necessary to explain the outcome. Wilson's supporters were lined up for a favorable ratification vote, but were unprepared to act unless he authorized them to accept mild qualifying language. This he refused to do.

The explanatory logic of propositions about whether an individual's actions

and characteristics were consequential in some episode is that of counter-factual reasoning. This is the only available alternative in analyses of single events to the quantitative analysis that would be called for if data existed on large numbers of comparable episodes. Counter-factual reasoning is not falsifiable, but it can be systematic. To be so it must be explicit and addressed to bounded questions—not conundrums about remote contingencies. “Was Lyndon Johnson’s action necessary for the 1965 American escalation in Vietnam to have occurred?” is an example of a question that is susceptible to investigation (Burke & Greenstein, 1989). “If Cleopatra’s nose had been an inch longer, how would world history have been changed?” is an example of one that is not.

Personality and political psychology more generally affect political processes not only through the actions taken by leaders more or less on their own, but also through group processes such as the collective suspension of reality testing manifested in what Irving Janis (1983) has characterized as groupthink. Groupthink occurs in highly cohesive decision-making groups. The members of such groups sometimes become so committed to their colleagues they more or less unconsciously suspend their own critical faculties in order to preserve group harmony. Janis, who is scrupulous about setting forth the criteria for establishing whether a group has engaged in groupthink, analyzes a number of historical episodes (the most striking example being the Bay of Pigs) in which a defective decision-making process appears to have led able policy-makers to make decisions on the basis of flawed assumptions and defective information. To the extent that groupthink is a purely collective phenomenon, emerging from group interaction, it is a manifestation of social psychology rather than personality psychology. But, as Janis suggests, personality probably contributes to groupthink in that some personalities are more likely than others to suspend their critical capacities in group settings.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Political institutions and processes operate through human agency. It would be remarkable if they were *not* influenced by the properties that distinguish one individual from another. In examining that influence, I have emphasized the logic of inquiry. In doing so I have not attempted a comprehensive review of the literature. For a variety of useful reviews and compendia, readers should consult Greenstein & Lerner (1971), Knutson (1973), Stone (1981), Herman (1986), and Simonton (1990).

To the extent that this article brings out possible pitfalls in studies of personality and politics, its message to cautious scholars may *seem* to be the following: Find pastures that can be more easily cultivated. Even daring scholars might conclude that the prospects for the systematic study of personality and politics

are too remote to justify the investment of scholarly time and effort. Nothing in this article is meant to support such conclusions. In a parable on the shortcomings of scientific opportunism, Kaplan (1964, pp. 11, 16–17) relates the story of a drunkard who lost his keys in a dark alley and is found searching for them under a street lamp, declaring, “It’s lighter here.” The drunkard’s search is a poor model. If the connections between the personalities of political actors and their political behavior are obscure, all the more reason to illuminate them.

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