



Philosopher-King or Polarizing Politician? A Personality Profile of Barack Obama

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Although U.S. President Barack Obama received extensive media coverage during the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign and later during the first two years of his presidency, many people still perceive him as elusive, or even contradictory. Using biographical facts and objective at-a-distance measures, this article presents a personality profile of Obama. The profile is organized around a fourfold conception of personality. Personality can be understood as the residue of past and present social contexts and is publicly visible as traits or consistencies of style. Internal beliefs, values, and other cognitions, as well as implicit motives, can only be indirectly observed and so are measured through content analysis. The resulting profile is used to explain some outcomes, as well as paradoxes and puzzles of Obama's performance as president. It also suggests predictions about the future course of his presidency.

KEY WORDS: Barack Obama, U.S. president, power motivation, achievement motivation, emotional stability [or "calmness"], operational code, race, racism

At the midpoint of his term as President of the United States Barack Obama remains a mystery to many people. His charismatic appeal of 2008 contrasts with his approval ratings hovering in the 40–45% range two years later.¹ Although he received extensive media coverage during the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign and the early months of his presidency, some people—political analysts, opponents, even supporters—feel that his personality is in some respects elusive or even contradictory.

For example, in early 2010 (over a year after Obama's inauguration), 160 middle- and working-class Midwestern citizens, aged 65–75, were asked "how would you describe your feelings about the election of Barack Obama as Presi-

¹ Actually, Presidents Clinton, Reagan, and Carter all had similar job approval levels at the same point in their first term (see <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/data/popularity.php>).

dent of the United States?" Their answers varied widely. As expected, participants' reactions often reflected their political party identification. Thus a White male Democrat described Obama as "the best choice," whereas a White male Republican said he was "unqualified to be president." However, the range of responses to other, less clearly partisan questions was also great. For example, Obama was variously described as both "open" and "not listening," "trustworthy" and "dishonest," a "likeable, well-intentioned guy," and "arrogant and a narcissist." Some commented on his "intelligence and character" and "ability to lead," whereas others saw him as "a political chameleon" with "weak leadership." Does he make "mature decisions" or is he "indecisive"? Is he "in tune with the common man" or does he "not consider how others feel"? Is he "trying to improve our country" or does he "care nothing for the country"?

Of course the sense of "mystery" surrounding Obama may reflect processes within the observer, such as implicit prejudice or stereotyping, rather than characteristics of Obama. Social psychology research furnishes considerable evidence that members of one's ingroup are perceived and remembered better than members of an outgroup, especially among people with negative attitudes toward the outgroup (see the extensive literature review by Pauker et al., 2009, p. 796). In a study specifically focused on people's perceptions of Obama, Kosloff, Greenberg, Schmader, Dechesne, and Weise (2010) found that increasing the salience of "race" as a differentiating category led to increased errors and negativity in people's beliefs about Obama (e.g., his religion).² Nevertheless, the seeming inconsistencies of Obama's behavior, as well as the contradictions of the historic nature of Obama's presidency, suggest that a systematic analysis of his personality would be useful—as a supplement or corrective to the choppy waters of public opinion, whipped up by the storms of partisan pundits and media hype. Perhaps it could also be a guide to anticipating and understanding the remaining years of his presidency.

In previous studies of personality and political leaders (Winter, 1996, 2003, 2005), I have found it convenient to employ a fourfold conception of personality, as shown in Figure 1. That is, personality can be thought of as a system of four interacting but fundamentally different components: *social contexts*, which are the embodied legacy of past environments and present situations; *traits*, or publicly visible stylistic regularities of behavior; *cognitions*, the person's explicit guiding principles, beliefs, values, and self-concept; and *motives*, or broad and recurring long-term goals. I will consider each of these elements of Obama's personality in turn.

² Two of the studies reported by Kosloff et al. (2010) involved only White, Latino/a, or Asian students; given the overall demographics of their university, it can be assumed that the great majority of the participants in the other two studies were also from these three ethnic groups.

	<i>Inner, subjective</i>	<i>Outer, objective</i>
<i>Enduring and "typical" across situations</i>	<p>COGNITIONS</p> <p>Measured from explicit analysis of texts</p>	<p>TEMPERAMENT, TRAITS</p> <p>Measured from observation, reports from observers</p>
<i>Situation-dependent</i>	<p>MOTIVES</p> <p>Measured from implicit content analysis of texts</p>	<p>SOCIAL CONTEXTS</p> <p>Measured from standard social science and biographical sources</p>

Figure 1. Elements of personality.

Social Contexts

People's lives are journeys through multiple social contexts—past and present, macro (culture, social structure, historical era) and micro (family, specific institutions, day-to-day situations). Initially, social contexts interact with genetic endowment and experience to form motives, cognitions, and traits. In this sense, personality can be understood as the *accumulation of prior embodied contexts*. Later, social contexts continue to provide particular opportunities, affordances, and barriers that *channel the expression* of personality characteristics.

People's social contexts can usually be assessed from standard biographical information, but a systematic analysis goes beyond superficial biographical details to focus on the enduring psychological significance of a person's unique configuration of social contexts. Barack Obama's life is remarkable for the many and varied social contexts he has experienced during the course of his life. In this article I will merely mention some of the more important of these contexts.

Macrocontexts: Race, History, Culture, and Country

For Barack Obama as for any other African American, race and racism are supremely important social contexts. For centuries, enslaved Africans in the United States "endured the lash of the whip, and plowed the hard earth" (Obama, 2009a). Even after the abolition of slavery, these experiences lingered on in the form of violence, oppression, and discrimination. They engendered a variety of Black strategies of adaptation, confrontation, and manipulation. Obama was born

at a significant historical moment in the history of American race relations, just as the struggle for Black civil rights was inscribing itself on the national conscience. He came of age as a beneficiary of that struggle—but in the 1980s age of Ronald Reagan, when the tides of civil rights and liberalism had already begun to ebb.

Obama's racial background is actually complex: as the child of a White mother and a Black father, he is technically of mixed race; moreover, his father was an African from Kenya, imbued with the legacy of British colonialism rather than American slavery and discrimination. In the American context, however, these complexities are overlooked, and people with any African ancestry are usually coded and treated as "African American" or "Black" (Khanna, 2010).³

Obama's early life was marked with many changes of cultural and national contexts. He was born in the "rainbow" state of Hawaii, well-known for its tolerant blend of Pacific Island, Asian, and European-American cultures. From ages 6 to 10, he lived with his mother and stepfather in Indonesia, after which he went back to Hawaii to live with his mother's parents (who were themselves originally from Kansas in the American Midwest). He attended college in southern California and New York City and then Harvard Law School in Massachusetts. For several years, he lived and worked as a community organizer in the largely African American south side of Chicago, the Midwestern "second city" of the United States. Later he taught law at the University of Chicago and then entered politics as an Illinois state senator. Thus by the time he was 30, Obama—with cultural roots in White America and Africa—had lived in the Eastern, Midwestern, and Pacific regions of the United States, as well as in Hawaii and Asia.

Social Structure and Institutions

Obama's childhood background could be placed somewhere along the border of lower-middle-class and working class, interspersed with periods of actual poverty. With the help of scholarships and loans, he was able to attend a series of elite private schools and colleges—Punahou School in Hawaii, Occidental College and Columbia University, and finally Harvard Law School. These educational institutions often serve the function of socializing children of the ruling class, while at the same time co-opting promising middle-class children into ruling-class perspectives (Domhoff, 2006, pp. 51–54, 72–74, 226). Finally, as a community organizer and later as a political candidate, Obama's political skills were shaped in the crucible of the legendary Chicago Democratic political "machine" of Mayor Richard M. Daley (see Betancur & Gills, 2004; Lizza, 2008; and Simpson, Bliss, Navratil, & Raines, 2004).

³ As contrasted, for example, with the more differentiated racial labels in the U.S. South before the American Civil War, in apartheid-era South Africa, or in many Latin American countries.

Personal Contexts: Gender, Life Stage, and Family

Obama is a man—but also a Black man, of a certain age (middle-aged in terms of American culture, but among the youngest of U.S. presidents). He is part of a dual-career family, married to a lawyer, with two daughters approaching adolescence. He occupies these gender and family roles at a time when traditional American conceptions of “masculinity” and “family” are in flux, such that he has been called America’s “first unisex president” (Cooper, 2009). In addition, his extended family is extraordinarily diverse in terms of nationality, culture, ethnicity, and geography (Kantor, 2009).

Although a full analysis of the effects of these many and varied social contexts is beyond the scope of this article, it should be clear that they constitute the objective social and material realities of Barack Obama’s world. They are both the ultimate source and foundation of the rest of his personality, described below, and also a complex series of channels through which these other variables are expressed.

Traits

Traits are the consistent stylistic aspects of human personality. Because they are labels for the public expression of personality, traits are relatively easy to measure—typically by observers’ ratings (or self-ratings, though these may reflect people’s cognitions or beliefs about their own traits, rather than the traits themselves). When ordinary people (or journalists) are asked to describe a person, they typically respond in the language of traits: adjectives such as “friendly,” “dominant,” “open-minded,” and so on. Personality psychologists have identified five major clusters of trait adjectives (McCrae & Costa, 2008; Wiggins, 1996) referred to as the five-factor or “big five” model: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to experience.

So far there have been no systematic studies of Obama’s traits in the manner of Rubenzer and Faschingbauer (2004), who asked presidential biographers to fill out a standard measure of the five trait factors on “their” president. However, Obama’s trait scores can be estimated from the psychologically oriented descriptions of him by Greenstein (2009) and Renshon (2008), as well as from the range of impressions and anecdotes reported by friends, associates, and interviewers. Since the trait assessments suggested here are based on secondary reports rather than measurements, they are really hypotheses that need confirmation in future, systematic research. On the other hand, making ratings on the basis of known biographical information is essentially the same procedure that Simonton (1988) and Rubenzer and Faschingbauer (2004) followed.

Perhaps Obama’s most striking trait is his legendary calmness. The nickname “No Drama Obama,” popularized during the 2008 election campaign, suggests he is high on *emotional stability*. Thus in a television interview at the height of the 2008 primary campaign, Obama said of himself that “I don’t get too high when things are

going well—I don't get too low when things are going badly" (KHNL News, 2008). Supporting this is Greenstein's conclusion that Obama has considerable emotional intelligence and a "first-rate temperament" (2009, chap. 14). Obama's calmness can be contrasted to the styles of several previous presidents: the unreflective, incurious calm of his immediate predecessor; the many neurotic episodes of Richard Nixon (Wills, 1970), Lyndon Johnson's sensitivity about his own hardscrabble background and corrosive envy of the Kennedys, John F. Kennedy's "macho" style, and Harry Truman's compulsive decisiveness. (On the other hand, Obama's 30-year smoking habit and difficulty in quitting suggest that his calmness may be more complicated than it first appears.⁴ I will return to this topic at the end of this article.)

Greenstein and Renshon mention Obama's openness to the views of others, desire for getting counsel from former opponents as well as allies, and preference for rigorous debate of alternatives before making decisions. Thus his initial cabinet was a "team of rivals." Obama displayed this style well before running for president, as a law student and later as a law school faculty member (Renshon, 2008). Thus the evidence points clearly to his being high in *openness to experience*. He is careful and plans ahead—studying "his chosen world like a Talmudist, charting trends and noting which rivals are strong and which weak" (Powell, 2008). This combination of careful planning and rigorous debate suggests a high level of *conscientiousness*, which is also consistent with the emphasis of both Greenstein and Renshon on Obama's strong organizational skills.

His levels of *extraversion* and *agreeableness* are harder to estimate from the available material. Certainly Obama is sociable and forceful, which suggests high extraversion. Yet he also seems to give off a sense of remoteness or emotional distance, which suggests only moderate extraversion. For example, friends from his law school days recall that "even those close to him did not always know exactly where he stood" (Kantor, 2007). Some observers experience Obama as reserved or even "cold" (Dowling & Warner, 2010). These observations suggest only moderate levels of agreeableness. Moderate levels on agreeableness and extraversion, combined with a very high level of calmness or emotional stability, could create the impression of aloofness, disengagement, or even elitism (Dowling & Warner, 2010).

Cognitions

The cognitive aspects of leaders' personalities include their world view and strategies for dealing with the world; their beliefs, attitudes, and values; and their

⁴ On December 9, 2010, the White House press secretary announced that Obama had not smoked in nine months (retrieved, January 5, 2011, from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/12/09/press-briefing-press-secretary-robert-gibbs-1292010>). Two months later, on February 8, 2011, Michelle Obama said that he had not smoked in almost a year (retrieved, April 22, 2011, from: http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/o/michelle_obama/index.html?scp=1&sq=obama%20AND%20smoking&st=cse).

views of morality, the good life, and the worthy society. Cognitive personality variables may reflect content (specific clusters of attitudes and values) or style (simplicity-complexity, and styles of causal attribution, particularly attributions for failure). Since people are usually fairly direct and open about their beliefs and values, the cognitive aspects of personality are normally measured through explicit analysis of words—speeches, interviews, and writings.

Operational Code

The concept of operational code (George, 1969; Schafer & Walker, 2006; Walker, Schafer, & Young, 2003) is widely used to summarize people's beliefs about the nature of the political world and the appropriate tactics for dealing with it. So far there have been no full analyses of Obama's operational code; however, Walker (2011, pp. 72–78) has published a brief analysis based on a pre-presidential text. This analysis suggests an unusual pattern. According to Walker, in Obama's world view, the political universe is hostile, dominated by chance, and therefore unpredictable. Perhaps understandably, he is pessimistic. For many people, such a pattern might lead to passive withdrawal rather than instrumental action. Obama, however, retains a sense of being in control. His instrumental beliefs and strategies emphasize cooperation based on appeals and rewards, rather than threats (though on issues perceived as critical, the appeal for cooperation is supplemented by an emphasis on control). Overall, Walker characterized the Obama operational code as "*pragmatic cooperation*" in a difficult world (p. 77). This is consistent with MacFarquhar's (2007) view of Obama's political style as "the conciliator."

In everyday language, this code can be seen in Obama's 2008 campaign message: "Things are bad now, real bad. Do you want that to continue or do you want things to get better?" (Danner, 2008, p. 12), or as Rowland (2010) phrased it, *the American Dream is threatened by many urgent problems, but by "working hard and working together," it can be reclaimed and strengthened* (pp. 204–206). With the sudden emergence of vivid and potentially catastrophic threats to the U.S. economy during the last six weeks of the 2008 campaign, this message resonated with increasing numbers of voters and ensured his victory.

This pattern of philosophical and operational beliefs recalls the teachings of neo-orthodox theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, whom Obama has described as "one of my favorite philosophers" in an interview with a *New York Times* columnist (Brooks, 2007):

I take away [from Niebuhr] the compelling idea that there's serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn't use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction. I take away . . . the sense we have to make these efforts knowing they are hard, and not swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism.

As president, Obama has indeed been pragmatic and inclusive, compromising when necessary while continuing to articulate a vision of “working hard and working together,” instead of “drawing lines in the sand.” In fact, during the second year of his presidency, many of Obama’s most loyal supporters became upset at his willingness to compromise and adjust his policies in the course of legislative debates, because they felt that the Republican opposition was exploiting Obama’s “inclusive” operational code merely in order to block his programs.

Other Major Cognitive Personality Variables

There are no at-a-distance methods of measuring *social dominance orientation* (the belief that some groups are naturally superior to others and so should be allowed to dominate them) or *authoritarianism* (a cluster of attitudes involving aggressive punishment of people who are “different” and who violate conventional morality). However, Obama’s writings, speeches, and conversation show very little evidence of either variable.

His cognitive structures are relatively complex. On the basis of systematic scoring of Obama’s pre-presidential radio addresses and his weekly presidential radio addresses, Suedfeld, Cross, and Brcic (2011) conclude that his average integrative complexity score of 2.12 is the second highest among U.S. presidents since World War II (Kennedy’s average score was 2.18). Such a score is consistent with his presumed high intelligence (see Simonton, 2009, p. 322n) and his years as a lecturer on constitutional law at the University of Chicago.

Motives

Motives involve goals. They are oriented toward the future, energizing activity and guiding the assembly of chains of specific acts to reach anticipated states of affairs. Although people readily give *reasons* for their actions, because of social desirability, repression, or simple inattention they may not be aware of their actual underlying *motives*. For this reason, motives are usually described as implicit processes (see McClelland, Koestner, & Weinberger, 1989). Hence they are measured indirectly through content analysis of verbal texts, using experimentally derived scoring systems (see Winter, 1998b for an account of the development of these systems).

Several decades of research with these scoring systems (see Schultheiss & Brunstein, 2010; Smith, 1992; Winter, 1996, chap. 5; Winter, 2003) have produced a consensus that *achievement* (a concern with excellence), *affiliation* (a concern with warm friendly relations and unity), and *power* (a concern with having impact on others) constitute three major social motives, or *dimensions of motivated behavior*. Of course, many combinations and fusions of these three motives are possible; for example, nurturance can be understood as a fusion of power and affiliation. Table 1 gives a brief description of the scoring system for the three

Table 1. Brief Scoring Definitions of Motive Imagery

Motive	Brief scoring definition of imagery
Achievement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reference to a standard of excellence, either directly by adjectives that evaluate performance or quality, or indirectly by actions that clearly suggest a concern with excellence. • Negative affect or counteraction in reaction to failure or lack of excellence. • Success in competition with others. • Unique accomplishment.
Affiliation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expression of warm, positive, friendly feelings toward others. • Negative affect about separation or disruption of a friendly relationship. • Affiliative, companionate activities. • Friendly nurturant acts.
Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong vigorous actions that have impact on others: force, attempts to convince or persuade, unsolicited help, attempts to monitor or control. • Actions that directly arouse a strong positive or negative emotional state in others. • Concern for reputation or prestige.

Note. Based on Winter (1994). This brief outline is only illustrative and is not sufficient for learning to score for research purposes.

kinds of verbal motive imagery. While any text (speech, interview, statement) can be scored for motive-related imagery, Winter (2002, 2005) has scored the first presidential inaugural addresses of all U.S. presidents, thereby making it possible to compare the motive profiles of different presidents while controlling for their political position and the occasion of the speech.

Any attempt to estimate Obama's personality from content analysis of his speeches, however, immediately raises the question of whose motives are being measured—the speaker's or the speechwriters? It is true that most of Obama's major speeches, including his 2009 inaugural address, were written by Jon Favreau, his chief speechwriter. On the other hand, Obama chose Favreau presumably because of his ability to put Obama's thoughts into words that Obama was comfortable speaking—that “felt right.” According to Pilkington (2009), Favreau “is said to carry Obama's autobiography, *Dreams from My Father*, wherever he goes. Obama has described Favreau as “the president's mind reader. . . . As a result . . . he could conjure up his master's voice as if an accomplished impersonator.” The inaugural address had “shuttled between them four or five times, following an initial hour-long meeting in which the president-elect spoke and Favreau took notes on his computer (see also Winter, 2002, pp. 46–47; and Suedfeld, 2010, pp. 1677–1678, on the issue of speechwriters).

Motives and Presidential Performance

Table 2 presents relationships between presidents' motive scores and actions and outcomes of their administrations, based on data presented by Winter (2010a). Notice that presidential greatness, as rated by historians, is significantly correlated

Table 2. Relationship of Presidents’ Motive Scores to Actions and Outcomes of Their Administration

	Correlations with motive imagery for			
	Achievement	Affiliation	Power	Congruence between president and U.S. society ⁵
Rated greatness	.08	.09	.41*	-.38*
Great decisions	.07	.28	.49**	-.28
% votes	-.04	-.14	-.04	.64***
Idealism	.53**	.21	.21	-.16
Flexibility	-.18	.29	.29	.09
Active-positive ⁶	-.08	.36	.86***	-.21
Active-negative	.85***	.04	-.32	-.38
War entry	.00	.18	.55***	.11

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Note: See Winter (2002) for the full definition of the presidential outcome variables.

Table 3. Motive Imagery Scores of Barack Obama’s January 20, 2009 Inaugural Address

	Motive imagery		
	Achievement	Affiliation	Power
Images/1,000 words	7.10	6.68	13.78
Standardized ⁷	49.80	50.41	70.70

with power motivation—as is U.S. entry into a war during the president’s administration. Power-motivated presidents end up in the “active positive” classification developed by Barber (1992). In contrast, achievement motivation, which predicts success as an entrepreneur in business, is unrelated to presidential performance: achievement-motivated presidents end up as “active negatives.” They may approach the presidency with idealism, but their lack of flexibility and the inherent lack of personal control, as contrasted to business settings, creates frustration and often rigidity (see Winter, 2010b, for an explanation of these relationships). No particular motive is related to electoral success measured by the percent of popular vote that the president received.

Motive Imagery in Obama’s Inaugural Address

Table 3 shows the motive scores of Obama’s January 20, 2009 inaugural address, in both raw score (motive images/1000 words) and standardized form, based on the first inaugural addresses of all 20th and 21st century U.S. presidents,

⁵ See Winter (1987) for definition and measurement of president/society “congruence.”

⁶ See Barber (1992).

⁷ Standardization based on the first inaugural addresses of all 20th and 21st century U.S. presidents; $M = 50$; $SD = 10$.

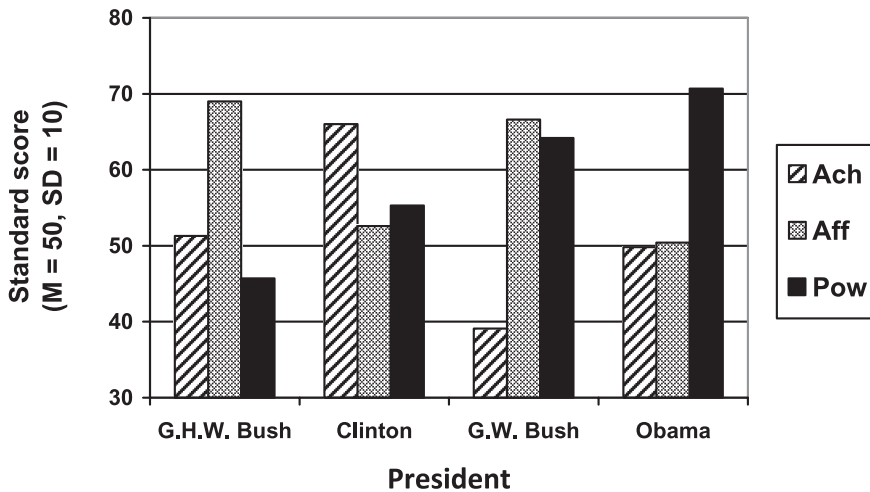


Figure 2. Motive profiles of Barack Obama and three previous U.S. Presidents.

with $M = 50$ and $SD = 10$.⁸ As shown in the table, Obama scores extremely high in power, and around average in achievement and affiliation.⁹ Figure 2 shows the profiles of Obama and his three predecessors as president.

Motive Imagery in Other Obama Speeches

Are the scores based on Obama's inaugural address an accurate assessment of his motive profile—that is, his characteristic or “dispositional” levels of the three motives?¹⁰ Further evidence about his characteristic motive dispositions can be obtained by comparing other Obama speeches with similar texts from other people who occupy a similar role and are in a similar situation. Thus Obama's inaugural speech was compared to first inaugural addresses of other occupants of the role of president because these are “tabula rasa” speeches given at the very beginning of a president's first term. Other comparisons are possible;

⁸ Winter (2002) has scored all U.S. presidential inaugural addresses back to George Washington in 1789; however, the changing natures of inaugural addresses, rhetorical style, and the role of the mass media make the presidents since 1901 a more appropriate standardization group.

⁹ In their scoring of Obama's weekly presidential radio broadcasts, Suedfeld, Cross, and Brcic (2011) found achievement motivation to be his highest motive—in raw score terms. It is not clear whether the difference between these results and the inaugural-based scores reflects the difference in type of text, occasion, and audience or real fluctuation of motive levels. Perhaps an assessment of Obama's long-term presidential actions, performance, and outcomes will resolve this question.

¹⁰ Of course motives are subject to arousal or engagement, as well as having characteristic or dispositional levels. In this sense, motives are “states” as well as “traits.” Thus Suedfeld, Cross, and Brcic (2011) demonstrate how the expression of Obama's motives and other personality variables fluctuates over time as a function of topic, audience, and political situation.

for example, his February 2007 speech announcing his candidacy for president can be standardized with the announcement speeches of the 21 other major 2008 presidential candidates, or his July 2008 nomination acceptance speech with those of the other three Democratic and Republican presidential and vice-presidential nominees (see Obama, 2008). (In previous research, Winter found close convergence among these different estimates in the case of Presidents Carter and Reagan [1982, p. 252] and Clinton, [1995, pp. 118–122]).

A first glance at the standardized scores in Table 4 might suggest that there were substantial differences between the motive profiles based on these two earlier Obama speeches (high achievement and affiliation) and the profile based on his inaugural address (high power; average achievement and affiliation). Actually, there are several possible explanations for the apparent divergence.

Strategic speechwriting. First, for strategic reasons Obama and his advisors and speechwriters may have altered or suppressed the expression of his “real” motives and accentuated expressions of achievement and affiliation as being more “acceptable.” After all, the combination of “Black” and “power”—echoing one of the slogans of the Civil Rights era—might still evoke threat in the minds of many White Americans, particularly working-class men, especially if one of the other candidates was a White woman. Emphasizing achievement and affiliation themes might have seemed the safer course in appealing to a White-majority electorate. According to this interpretation, Obama’s “real” motives could safely emerge only after he was elected president.

Standardization artifacts. A second possibility is that the apparent motive profile differences among the three Obama speeches may be an artifact of the different standardization groups employed for each speech. As shown in Tables 3 and 4, the raw scores (motive images/1,000 words) are fairly similar across the three speeches. For example, the power motivation score of his announcement speech was 11.24 images/1,000 words, which is fairly close to the 13.78 images/1,000 words of his inaugural. However, when standardized on the sample of other 2008 major candidates, the first score becomes 47.19, whereas the latter raw score becomes 70.70 when standardized on the other U.S. presidents.

Table 4. Motive Imagery Scores of Barack Obama’s Announcement of Candidacy and Nomination Acceptance Speeches

	Motive imagery		
	Achievement	Affiliation	Power
<i>Announcement of candidacy speech (February 10, 2007)</i>			
Images/1,000 words	6.59	7.75	11.24
Standardized	54.36	66.45	47.19
<i>Nomination acceptance speech (August 28, 2008)</i>			
Images/1,000 words	7.50	4.58	9.16
Standardized	64.44	55.24	44.47

If the 2008 candidates included several who were exceptionally high in power motivation, this would lower the standardized score of Obama's announcement speech. Along these lines, it is interesting to note that in 2008 several candidates, such as Republicans Mitt Romney, Sam Brownback, Duncan Hunter, and Tom Tancredo, and Democrats Bill Richardson, Tom Vilsack, and Dennis Kucinich scored exceptionally high in power motivation: for these seven candidates, $M = 15.13$ images/1,000 words, which is higher than almost all major candidates studied in previous presidential campaigns since 1976.

The motive scores from Obama's nomination acceptance speech were standardized on the very small sample of 2008 Democratic and Republican nomination acceptance speeches ($N = 4$), which makes standardized scores unstable. In fact, Obama, Biden, and Palin all had quite similar raw power motive scores (range = 8.48 to 9.16 images/1000 words). McCain's raw power motive score was much higher (17.26 images/1,000 words), largely because of his repeated use of the word "fight," which usually scores for power imagery. Standardization had the effect of greatly lowering the standardized score for the other three candidates.

Motive arousal and change. A final possibility is that all the profiles are valid reflections of Obama's "real" motives *at the time of the speeches on which they were based*, but that his motives changed from before to after election as president. After all, *being* president is very different from *running for* president: as Tetlock (1981) has shown, presidential scores on integrative complexity normally change from before to after their election. This explanation involves the dual nature of implicit motives, as *states* as well as *dispositions*: they wax and wane, aroused in response to certain stimuli and situations and satisfied, diverted, or displaced in response to others (see Atkinson, 1982, for a formal statement of this process).

Further evidence for this explanation comes from Figure 3, which adds motive imagery scores for Obama's first two State of the Union speeches, in 2010 and 2011. (These speeches are annual messages, delivered in late January to the combined House of Representatives and Senate, and televised across the entire country.) Obama's motive imagery scores for all five speeches are plotted in the figure, in raw or *unstandardized* form (images/1,000 words). This procedure uses Obama as his own control over time; however, it also necessarily ignores situational differences such as occasion, audience, salient issues at the time, and so forth. The figure shows that power is consistently the highest motive and was relatively constant since the inauguration. Affiliation, usually the lowest motive, shows a gradual decline over time.¹¹ Achievement was moderate until the 2011 State of the Union speech, when it rose sharply, almost to the level of power. That

¹¹ Note that affiliation as a *motive* is not the same as cooperation as part of an *operational* code or "strategy." Cooperative behavior *can* be driven by affiliation, but it can also be driven by achievement or power. Under conditions of threat, affiliation motivation can lead to "prickly," defensive behavior (see Winter, 1996, pp. 145–149).

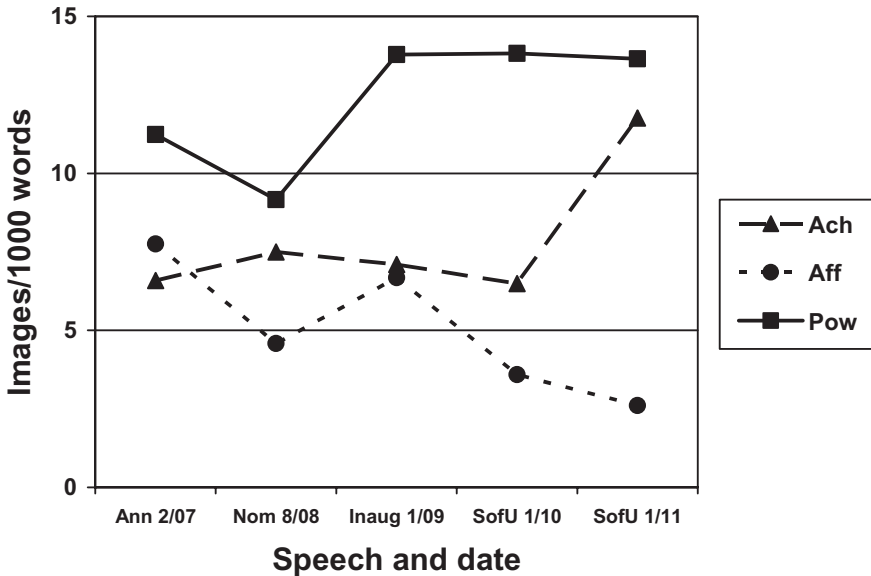


Figure 3. Motive imagery scores of major Obama speeches over time.

Ann = Announcement of candidacy speech, February 10, 2007

Nom = Nomination acceptance speech, August 28, 2008

Inaug = Inaugural address, January 20, 2009

SofU 1/10 = State of the Union speech, January 27, 2010

SofU 1/11 = State of the Union speech, January 25, 2011

address came shortly after the 2010 midterm Congressional election, in which Obama's party suffered loss of a majority (and hence control) in the House of Representatives and a reduced majority in the Senate. It seems likely that the striking increase in achievement imagery occurred in response to this major electoral defeat (even Obama called it a "shellacking") for the president's party. This change is further discussed in the next section.

Comparisons and Predictions

Using motive scores in standardized form, the similarity of different leaders' motive profiles can be assessed by using a three-dimensional generalization of the Pythagorean formula to measure the distance between the "points" representing each leader's scores on power (considered as the up-down dimension), achievement (the forward-backward dimension), and affiliation (near-far). By this measure, Obama most closely resembles Harry Truman and John F. Kennedy. It is worth noting that for all three the pathway into politics began in an urban political machine, from which they nevertheless emerged without being tarnished by

scandal. Each faced great difficulty in getting the U.S. Congress to enact his program. Truman also experienced wide swings in public approval of his performance as president.¹²

Drawing on Obama's inaugural motive scores in Table 3 and the action and outcome correlates of presidential motives shown in Table 2 (discussed further in Winter, 2002, 2010a), several predictions about the Obama presidency can be made, as outlined below.

Obama will be successful in the scrimmage of politics and will be highly rated by historians (very high power). Such a prediction may seem dubious, given the Republican Party's success in the 2010 midterm Congressional election and the signs of increased polarization of American politics.¹³ On the other hand, we should not ignore the many legislative successes of Obama's first two years. For example, he secured Congressional passage of major health care reform legislation, in contrast to Clinton's failure 16 years earlier. Even more interesting is a close comparison of the tactics used by the two presidents. Clinton acted in ways completely consistent with his high-achievement motivation: sequestering a group of health-care "experts" tasked with producing the perfect proposal, but giving almost no attention to the politics of getting it through Congress (see Winter, 2010b). Obama, in contrast, behaved like a power-motivated politician: outlining broad ideas, drawing in members of Congress to write the proposal, and at the end "schmoozing" and compromising with leaders of both parties.

Other Obama legislative accomplishments include reform of financial industry regulation and a major stimulus package. Finally, during the post-2010 election "lame duck" session of Congress, the Obama administration secured passage of another major economic stimulus package (disguised as the continuation of expiring tax cuts, bundled with other measures), repeal of the ban on gays and lesbians in the U.S. military, and ratification of a major arms reduction treaty with Russia.

Obama will be charismatic to large numbers of Americans (very high power). He has continued to enjoy great popularity among many groups of supporters (ethnic minorities, intellectuals, younger voters). On the other hand, he has been severely attacked by right-wing legislators, media commentators, and members of the "Tea Party" movement. This suggests a more nuanced formulation of the

¹² Kennedy's time as president was too brief for the range of his job approval ratings to be comparable; however his approval ratings were declining toward 50% at the time of his assassination in November 1963.

¹³ Readers may wonder whether the correlation between presidential power motivation and rated performance will still be valid if recent presidents are included. George W. Bush had quite high power motivation, and although the United States did enter two wars during his presidency, he is not currently considered a "great" president by most observers. However, some would argue that his administration is probably too recent for comprehensive and definitive judgments to be passed on it. Sometimes presidents' reputations change as time passes. Furthermore, even a relatively high correlation between power motivation and rated greatness (+.41), while statistically significant, only explains about 17% of the variance in the latter variable. There is ample room for exceptions, in both directions.

relationship between leaders' power motivation and their charismatic appeal: power motivation is associated with higher levels of affect toward the leader, *either* in a positive (charismatic) *or* negative (hostile) direction—probably depending on the relative political orientations of leader and follower. In other words, people tend to react to power-motivated leaders with *either* strongly positive *or* strongly negative sentiments: “love them or hate them.” This is consistent with Winter's (2010a) finding that presidential power motivation is also associated with assassination attempts.

Obama will enjoy being president (very high power and only average achievement); however, if his achievement motivation increases further, he may become frustrated by political conflict or the ebbing of popular support—as he experienced during 2010 and especially at the 2010 midterm Congressional election). Power-motivated leaders tend to enjoy politics as a “scrimmage,” in which alliances and the balance of forces are constantly changing. In contrast, achievement-motivated leaders tend to complain that their good ideas go unappreciated, as Bill Clinton (2004) did immediately after his party's losses in the 1994 midterm elections: “I remain convinced that those hard *decisions were good* for America . . . I had *done a lot of good*, but no one knew it” (pp. 631, 632, emphasis added). However, over the longer term Clinton responded to the 1994 election results with a *decline in achievement imagery* and an *increase in power imagery* (see Winter, 1998a), which presaged the turnaround of his presidency and near-landslide reelection in 1996.

At the time of writing, Obama still seems to enjoy the presidency, without complaining (in public, at least) about his problems. However, this impression is based on his public demeanor: we must recognize that accurate perception of other people's negative emotions is very difficult (see Jordan et al., 2011). Nevertheless, Obama has not expressed any obvious funk.

The United States may become involved in another war during Obama's presidency (very high power). During 2009–10, Obama did increase U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, but that was an ongoing war. At the time of initial writing of this article (December 2010), there were many crises that could have escalated to war; for example, in North Korea, Iran, Pakistan, Yemen, various countries in Africa, even Mexico. This prediction did not necessarily mean that Obama would order an unprovoked or preemptive U.S. invasion of another country, as his predecessor did in Iraq. Rather, it seemed likely that U.S. involvement would be framed in the terms of the just war theory that Obama articulated in his 2009 speech at the U.S. Military Academy (Obama, 2009b). Indeed, in March 2011 the rebellion and civil war in Libya presented just such an occasion for Obama (after characteristic cautious deliberation) to order U.S. military intervention—justified and urged even by the Arab League in the name of humanitarianism. Still, at the time of final revising (July 2011), Obama has limited U.S. military involvement to air attacks. Although in response to a challenge by Republican members of Congress Obama has claimed that this involvement does not constitute

“hostilities,” it does seem to fit almost any definition of a “war.” In any case, the other sites of crisis also remain possibilities for additional conflicts.

Combining the Components of Presidential Personality

Sources of Obama’s Calmness

For analytical purposes we may distinguish separate components or variables of personality, but it is important to remember that in real life these components interact and modify each other. As an example, consider Obama’s striking quality of calmness, discussed above. Certainly his strong trait of emotional stability, which may have some genetic basis, is an important foundation of this calmness. However, media discussions of Obama’s calmness (e.g., Zernike, 2008) typically confine their explanations to temperament factors with a presumed genetic heritage. In Obama’s case, it seems clear that other components of his personality—particular social contexts—also play important parts in his calmness. Consider race: just to *survive* in a world of oppression and discrimination, African Americans had to develop strong controls on their public expression of emotions. Moreover, as Cooper (2009) points out, any Black person (especially a Black man) who hopes to succeed in the domains of the White world—such as Columbia University, Harvard Law School, or Congressional and presidential politics—must become even more adept at suppressing emotions, especially anger, since “angry Black man” is a powerful negative image in American society. These later institutional experiences further reinforced genetic predispositions and race-based strictures: for example, Harvard Law School rewarded tight emotional control perhaps as much as knowledge of the law.

In more positive ways, other Obama social contexts are also relevant to his calmness. Hawaii, the land of his early childhood and then adolescence, has an atmosphere of relaxed and easygoing tolerance. During the 2008 campaign, Obama spoke of how the experience of living in Hawaii had affected him: “Hawaii brings together people from all walks of life. . . . The truth is that there is more cooperation and people getting together despite different religions or different ethnicities than just about any place else in the country. And that spirit, that aloha spirit is something I carry with me” (KHNL News, 2008). Indonesia, where he lived from age six to ten, fostered another aspect of calmness—a sense of *halus*, of “being patient, calm, a good listener” (Scott, 2011).

Despite the many changes and moves, Obama’s mother gave him (in his own words) “a sense of unconditional love that was big enough that, with all the disturbances of our lives, it sustained me, entirely” (quoted in Scott, 2011). His grandparents, who had a major role in raising him between the ages of 10 and 18, were also very loving. These early and multiple sources of unconditional love and positive regard helped to create a firm foundation for calm confidence in adulthood.

Finally, Obama's own father provided a vivid example of the cost of *losing* control, thereby becoming a "negative identity" for his son (see Jacobs, 2011). Back in his native Kenya, the senior Obama became embroiled in arguments with Kenyan president Jomo Kenyatta and subsequently took to drink, ending up a bitter and defeated man. His son was later to say that "every man is either trying to make up for his father's mistakes or live up to his expectations" (Merida, 2007, p. A12; see also Sector & McCormick, 2007).

Obama's intelligence, along with his low authoritarianism and high openness to experience, facilitate an alternative adaptive response to threat—trying to *understand* rather than displaying the more common fright/flight/fight instinctive response syndrome. Finally, his very high power motivation, compared with his only average achievement motivation, reflects a motivational profile that, according to Winter (2010b), can mitigate the inevitable frustrations of politics, thus promoting a calm demeanor.

Many of these Obama characteristics—calm, discipline, and reflectiveness in pursuit of a power goal—seemed to come together in his decision to go forward with plans to capture Osama bin Laden in April 2011. According to an account in *The New York Times* (Mazzetti, Cooper, & Baker, 2011):

It was time to decide. Around the table, the group went over and over the negative scenarios. There were long periods of silence, one aide said. And then, finally, Mr. Obama spoke: "I'm not going to tell you what my decision is now—I'm going to go back and think about it some more." But he added, "I'm going to make a decision soon." Sixteen hours later, he had made up his mind.

Comparing Obama and Bush

Comparing Obama to George W. Bush, his immediate predecessor, provides another demonstration of the importance of considering the interaction among the different aspects of personality. Their motive profiles are fairly similar—particularly their high power and low-to-average achievement motivation. Consistent with this similarity, both went through a youthful period as "Prince Hal," experimenting with alcohol and drugs, before emerging as "King Henry."¹⁴ On the other hand, the two presidents are different on many other personality variables. Obama comes from a mixed-race and African American background spent in such diverse places as Hawaii, Indonesia, and Chicago. Bush was born to wealth and White privilege and grew up in a small Texas city, as well as at an elite private boarding school in Massachusetts. Both presidents may be above average in extraversion and emotional stability, but they contrast sharply on conscientiousness and openness to experience (Obama high and Bush low), and perhaps

¹⁴ See Shakespeare's "King Henry IV, Part I."

agreeableness (Bush higher than Obama). Finally, Obama is politically liberal, with a complex cognitive style and articulate speaking manner, whereas Bush is conservative, lower in complexity, and awkward in many public speaking contexts. Thus their similar motive profiles are expressed in very different cognitive, trait, and contextual channels. In the end, a complete personality portrait must consider each element of personality, both by itself and in interaction with all other elements (see Winter, 2005).

Conclusion: Philosopher-King or Polarizing Politician?

Returning to the question raised by the title of this article, what answers are suggested by the personality profile? Supporting the first image—Obama as philosopher-king—are his calm demeanor, intelligence, and especially his high integrative complexity. These were nurtured by a liberal arts education that resembles the regimen Plato prescribed for his ideal rulers. Obama seems to have, in Plato's words, "a naturally well proportioned and gracious mind, which will move spontaneously toward the true being of everything."¹⁵

On the other hand, the second image—Obama as polarizing politician—also receives considerable support. Much of the polarization surrounding Obama is due to social context factors—specifically, his race and the explicit and implicit prejudice of White Americans, as has been demonstrated by a wide variety of survey and experimental evidence (see especially Piston, 2010; Tesler & Sears, 2010; see also Ehrlinger et al., 2011; Knowles, Lowery, & Schaumberg, 2010; Payne et al., 2010; Pyszczynski, Henthorn, Motyl, & Gerow, 2010; Schmidt & Nosek, 2010).

But it isn't all the electorate. Given Americans' widespread ambivalence about power, Obama's high level of power motivation and the successful political actions it energizes and drives may create a negative impression of a "power-hungry" leader. Moreover, much of Obama's learning about politics took place in the Chicago machine school, where deals are cut, (conflicting) ideals compromised, and votes traded—with the goal, to be sure, that irreconcilable groups and interests be reconciled. "Politics" in this sense is essential to keeping the peace when the ties of democracy become frayed. Yet by this process "politics" acquires another, sinister sense: "politicians" will sell out any cause, forget about any promise, and embrace any enemy to ensure the survival of themselves and their party (see Winter, 2010b). When that happens—as it always must in any contested polity—supporters despair and opponents attack.

In the end, the alternatives posed by the title may be a misleading dichotomy. By itself, the image of a philosopher-king is a seductive illusion—a template for totalitarian rule by a meritocratic class, as Popper (1947) suggested over 60 years ago; Obama's "favorite philosopher," Reinhold Niebuhr, would surely concur. By themselves, the skills of power and politics may be sounding brass or tinkling

¹⁵ *The Republic*, V, 484 (Jowett translation).

cymbal. As Max Weber (1919/1948) concluded about the political vocation, “Politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards. It takes both passion [polarizing politician] and perspective [philosopher-king]” (p. 128).

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