

Average Joe, Crooked Hillary and the unStable Narcissist: Expert Impressions of 2016 and 2020

U.S. Presidential Candidates' Public Personas

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Abstract

The U.S. 2020 presidential election has, like the 2016 election, brought attention to the two candidates' personalities. We invited HEXACO researchers to complete observer-report

inventories for Joe Biden's and Donald Trump's public personalities. Given previous comparison of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump prior to the 2016 election, we are also able to compare the 2020 candidates to the 2016 candidates. Our ratings reveal a relatively average profile of personality traits for Joe Biden, including higher ratings than Trump for Honesty-Humility, Agreeableness, Extraversion, and Conscientiousness. Biden also scores higher on all traits than Clinton other than her slightly higher scores for Conscientiousness and Openness. In comparison to his 2016 ratings, in 2020 Trump is rated as having lower Extraversion and much lower Conscientiousness along with higher Emotionality (especially Fearfulness). Overall, our data once again suggest a Narcissistic profile for Trump, with elements of psychopathic personality traits, while Biden presents as an outgoing individual with slightly above average prosocial traits.

Keywords: HEXACO; personality; Honesty-Humility; Hillary Clinton; Donald Trump; presidential candidates

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In the 2016 election, Donald Trump ensured that temperament became an important issue in terms of electability when he claimed that he had a “winning temperament” whereas Hillary Clinton had the “wrong temperament” to be president (Collins, 2016). According to Collins (2016), the statement Trump made about Clinton’s “wrong temperament” in 2016 led to an explosion in the number of internet searches for the term “temperament”, indicating that people felt that it was an important aspect to consider. The apparent attention given to issues of temperament in the 2016 election led us to believe that it would be important to offer an informed view of how each candidate is perceived in 2020. Temperament has also become an issue in the 2020 election, with potential voters favoring Biden on both temperament and caring according to a CBS News/YouGov national poll done in September 2020 (Lemon, 2020).

Temperament is defined as the compilation of traits that influence behavior and are stable across time (Farrell et al., 2015). In other words, temperament measures individual differences, typically in younger populations (infants, children, and adolescents). In adults, individual differences are examined through personality rather than temperament, though personality and temperament tend to be quite strongly correlated (Farrell et al., 2015). In a previous study examining perceived personality traits in presidential candidates, Visser and colleagues (2017) asked a group of personality experts to rate Trump and Clinton on basic personality traits. The present study used the same methodology to examine the 2020 presidential candidates: Joe Biden and Donald Trump.

There have been many instances of authors attempting to describe Trump’s personality. Consistent with narcissism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), Dan McAdams (2016) described Trump

as being “sky-high” on Extraversion and Antagonism¹. While many American presidents have displayed high Extraversion (e.g., George W. Bush, Bill Clinton), Trump’s extremely high Antagonism is extraordinary. Upon realizing that, renowned presidential journalist Bob Woodward recently released a book about Trump titled *Rage* (Woodward, 2020). Trump responded by saying Woodward was “rapidly fading” and his book was a “political hit job.” A sample of 75 experts in US politics agreed with McAdams’ assessment as they rated Trump on the Big Five model of personality as being very low on Conscientiousness and Emotional Stability, and very high on Extraversion and Antagonism, and average on Openness to Experience (Nai & Maier, 2018). Leaked sources also suggest that contrary to his 2015 promise to work hard and not take vacations (Kurtz, 2015), Trump is reported to be lazy, impulsive (e.g., his tweets) and unfocused (Nazaryan, 2017). In an analysis of his time in office, he has spent approximately 20% of his time golfing and another 30% at Trump-owned vacation properties (Johnstone, 2019; Nguyen, 2019). Almost two thirds of his working days are spent in “Executive Time” that involve a lot time spent on personal phone calls and watching TV (McCammond & Swan, 2019). His pandemic response appears to have been motivated by a fear of losing the election rather than saving public lives (Woodworth, 2020). Thus, public perception of Trump’s personality traits appears to have evolved in some cases (e.g., lower Conscientiousness) while remaining stable in other areas (e.g., higher Antagonism).

As noted above, some of Trump’s personality traits are extreme enough that some researchers have questioned whether they qualify for the Dark Triad of personality traits: narcissism, psychopathy and Machiavellianism (Paulhus & Williams, 2002). For example, Kevin Dutton (2016) asked official biographers to rate Trump and other leaders on psychopathic traits.

¹ To avoid confusion with general audiences, we refer to Big Five Agreeableness by using its inverse Antagonism and use the term Agreeableness to refer only to HEXACO Agreeableness.

Trump was rated as high on psychopathic traits in all aspects, including fearless dominance, cold-heartedness, and self-centred impulsivity. More recently, clinical psychologist Mary Trump wrote a book describing her uncle as “narcissistic” and “sociopathic” (Trump, 2020), a claim that was supported by other psychologists (Panetta, 2020). Trump’s sister, a former federal judge, Maryanne has described him as cruel, lying, unprincipled and untrustworthy (Kranish, 2020). Thus, since 2016 there has been a plethora of formal attempts to further understand Trump’s personality.

In contrast to Trump, there have been fewer attempts to investigate the personality traits of Joe Biden. In one analysis of Biden’s personality, Immelman (2019) described him as a conciliatory extrovert (outgoing, accommodating) and ambitious and dominant. According to Immelman, a conciliatory extrovert is both outgoing and accommodating. Such individuals have a strong need for affiliation with others driving them to seek others’ approval through the use of compliments and flattery. Further, people labeled as outgoing are socially confident and seek popularity. Immelman also noted that Biden was high on ambition and accommodation. Ambitious people tend to be bold and competitive and often do well in leadership roles (Millon, 1994), though they also tend to have a sense of entitlement and expect to be recognized for their abilities/skills. According to Millon (1994), high scores on the Outgoing scale combined with low Conscientiousness (as seen with Biden) can lead to susceptibility to flattery from others. On a different note, Biden’s loss of his wife and daughter in a car crash, and later the loss of one of his adult sons, is believed to have resulted in an exceptionally strong sense of empathy (Baldoni, 2020). That strong empathy has become a hallmark of his campaign and a key feature emphasized by his endorsers (Mercia, 2020). How all of these traits translate into Biden’s

general personality remains to be seen, particularly in comparison with Trump. To study Biden's personality, we turn to the HEXACO model of personality.

The HEXACO is particularly useful because of its' superior prediction of antisocial tendencies (Book et al., 2015; Book et al., 2016; Hodson et al., 2018; Lee & Ashton, 2014). The HEXACO personality model (Ashton & Lee, 2007) is comprised of six personality factors: Honesty-Humility (H), Emotionality (E), eXtraversion (X), Agreeableness (A), Conscientiousness (C), and Openness to Experience (O). Honesty-Humility represents a tendency towards exploiting others for selfish gains at the low end versus helping others at one's own expense at the high end. Emotionality represents a tendency towards callousness and low fearfulness at the low end versus empathy and fearfulness at the high end. Agreeableness represents a tendency towards anger and impatience at the low end versus patience and forgiveness at the high end. These three factors combine to account for prosocial or antisocial behavior alongside a general Altruism factor (Ashton & Lee, 2007).

The remaining three factors account for the expenditure of one's efforts and energy. At its high end, eXtraversion, is related to confidence, optimism, charisma, and sociability. At the high end, Conscientiousness represents a tendency towards hard work and being organized and disciplined, while the low end represents tendencies towards laziness, impulsivity and a lack of discipline. Finally, Openness to Experience captures the tendency to be interested in new or unconventional ideas at the high end.

In 2016, HEXACO personality experts rated both Clinton and Trump as low on Honesty-Humility and Emotionality and high on eXtraversion (Visser et al., 2017). They differed substantially in terms of Agreeableness and Conscientiousness with Donald Trump perceived as being low on Conscientiousness and exceptionally low on Agreeableness, whereas Clinton was

seen as high on Conscientiousness and only slightly below average on Agreeableness. Trump's personality traits most closely matched those of narcissism with some elements of psychopathy, while Clinton's personality traits most closely matched those of Machiavellianism (Visser et al., 2017).

The Current Study

In the current study we asked researchers who had authored publications using the HEXACO model of personality to rate each of the candidates' public personas on the HEXACO. Clearly, these raters did not have access to the candidates themselves and were only evaluating their public personalities. We view these profiles as useful because the general public does not have access to private personality profiles of the candidates, only their public profiles. Thus, they are democratically evaluated based on their public, rather than private, personalities. Our goal is to therefore provide the most accurate profile of that public personality. We chose HEXACO experts rather than political experts due to their nuanced understanding of the HEXACO model and items (as in Visser et al., 2017).

We also compared the current presidential candidates' ratings with those from 2016. We expected the findings for Donald Trump to be broadly similar to what we saw in the Visser et al. 2017 paper: low Honesty-Humility, Emotionality, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness and high eXtraversion. While his scores in 2016 on Honesty-Humility, Emotionality, and Agreeableness were very low and unlikely to change much, we did expect that there would be a drop in Conscientiousness ratings from 2016 given his tendencies to seemingly avoid work. For Joe Biden, we also predicted low Honesty-Humility. He has already been described as "entitled" and believing that others should recognize his skills and abilities (Immelman, 2019), which suggests lower Humility in particular. Given that he was also described as "conciliatory", we

expected that he would score higher on Agreeableness and much has been made of his capacity for empathy (i.e., higher Emotionality). We otherwise expected relatively normal personality profiles that would compare favorably to the personality profile of Clinton.

Methods

Participants:

Eighteen researchers who had served as first author on a published article incorporating the HEXACO personality inventory agreed to participate in the current study. Participants were asked to broadly describe their political orientation as left, center or right, and 11 reported being left, 2 center, and the remaining 5 did not indicate their political orientation. Participants agreed to provide an unbiased rating of both candidates. Data from a similar procedure (Visser et al., 2017) produced data on Trump and Clinton that most closely rated the personality profiles generated by Independent voters (versus Democratic or Republican voters). We therefore have reasonable confidence in the ability of personality experts to produce unbiased profiles under the present conditions.

Measures:

Personality. Participants completed the 100-item observer report of the HEXACO PI-R (Lee & Ashton, 2018) for each candidate. Participants respond a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The inventory yields scores on six personality dimensions that were fully described in the introduction: Honesty-Humility (made up of *sincerity, fairness, greed avoidance, and modesty*), Emotionality (*fearfulness, anxiety, sentimentality, and dependence*), eXtraversion (*social self-esteem, social boldness, sociability, and liveliness*), Agreeableness (*forgiveness, gentleness, flexibility, and patience*), Conscientiousness (*organization, diligence,*

perfectionisms, and prudence), and Openness to Experience (*aesthetic appreciation, inquisitiveness, creativity, and unconventionality*). .

Results

Table 1 shows the HEXACO factor and facet level scores for Biden and Trump (rated by the current sample of experts), as well as norms from the original validation of the observer report of the HEXACO-PI. Figure 1 summarizes how the candidates compare to the norms (in percentiles). We will discuss the observer ratings for each of the HEXACO factors individually. For comparison sake, we have also included a table (Table 2; Visser et al. 2017) with HEXACO scores for Trump (2020 and 2016), Biden (2020), and Clinton (2016). Given that the data are from different sets of raters, we do not make direct comparisons, though we do discuss general differences in the discussion.

Honesty-Humility

As can be seen in Figure 1 and Table 1, while Donald Trump was rated by experts as being extremely low on Honesty-Humility, Joe Biden received ratings in the average range. In terms of Honesty-Humility facets, Joe Biden was rated as moderate/average on most of the facets, although he received a lower rating on Sincerity. Donald Trump, on the other hand, was given ratings in the extremely low range for all of the facets of Honesty-Humility. We have graphed these results in Figure 2.

Emotionality

Both of the candidates were rated as moderate on Emotionality (see Figure 1, Table 2). Joe Biden received moderate ratings for Fearfulness, Anxiety, and Dependence, while scoring high on Sentimentality. Donald Trump was rated as extremely low on Sentimentality, low on Anxiety, moderate on Dependence, and high on Fearfulness (see Figure 3).

eXtraversion

As detailed in Figure 1 and Table 2, while Joe Biden was rated as high on eXtraversion overall, Donald Trump was seen as moderate/average. In terms of the facets of eXtraversion, Joe Biden scored as high on Boldness and Sociability and moderate on Social Self Esteem and Liveliness. Donald Trump, on the other hand, scored as extremely high on Boldness but was rated as moderate/average on the other facets. Figure 4 shows the relative ratings for the eXtraversion facets for each candidate.

Agreeableness

In terms of Agreeableness, Joe Biden was rated by experts as being moderately Agreeable. He was rated as high on Flexibility, and moderate on Forgiveness, Gentleness, and Patience. Donald Trump was seen by our expert raters as extremely low in Agreeableness (with all facets being rated as extremely low; see Figure 5).

Conscientiousness

Our experts rated Joe Biden as moderately Conscientious. He was rated as high in Diligence, but moderate in Organization, Perfectionism, and Prudence. Donald Trump was rated as being extremely low on Conscientiousness. He did receive moderate ratings on Diligence but was “extremely low” on the other facets (see Figure 6).

Openness to Experience

Joe Biden was rated as moderate on Openness to Experience. He was rated as low on Creativity, but moderate on Aesthetic Appreciation, Inquisitiveness, and Unconventionality. Donald Trump, on the other hand was rated as “extremely low” on Openness to Experience and all of its’ facets (see Figure 7).

Discussion

In this study, the personality ratings for Donald Trump were very similar to the ratings from the previous study conducted in the lead-up to the 2016 election (Visser et al., 2017). The changes from that 2016 profile largely reflect a decrease in self-confidence, an increase in fearfulness and a dramatic drop in self-control and discipline. Joe Biden's ratings, on the other hand, were moderate in all personality factors with the exception of his very high Extraversion. He had higher scores on all of the prosocial traits than did either Trump or Clinton.

The analysis of the 2016 presidential candidates' personalities suggested that Hillary Clinton's profile might resemble that of the stereotypical politician – hard-working and sociable but much lacking in sincerity (Visser et al., 2017). It suggested that voters looking for change might vote for Trump, whose personality appeared to be a departure from the traits typical associated with a successful politician (especially his boldness). The personality ratings from the current study suggests that Biden might offer voters a more “average” personality set that is more prosocial than either Clinton or (especially) Trump. His sincerity was rated low, as was Clinton's, but he was rated much higher than Clinton in other aspects of Honesty-Humility.

With regards to Biden's noted empathy, he had higher ratings of sentimentality/empathy than either Clinton or Trump. Biden and 2020 Trump had relatively similar scores in Emotionality due to Trump's increase in fearfulness. The latter may be indicative of his willingness to campaign on a fear-based narrative that emphasizes potential future costs if he loses rather than potential benefits if he wins (Bennett, 2020). The net result is that Trump's overall public Emotionality score increased slightly due to his perceived fearfulness, while Biden's Emotionality remained average due to his high empathy combined with a degree of fearlessness.

Another modest change from previous raters' assessment of Trump was lower eXtraversion ratings. In particular, the 2016 HEXACO experts rated Trump as being over the 90th percentile in the social self-esteem aspect of eXtraversion. At that time, it was noted that Trump's high social self-esteem and social boldness could be attractive and charismatic to voters. The current raters assessed Trump's social self-esteem as being close to the mean. It is possible that the current ratings reflect a change in Trump's personality, as he has faced enormous levels of criticism during his presidency. In particular, his continuous need to respond to any insult with a combative tweet fails to project the image of self-confidence that even his supporters wish he portrayed (Johnson, 2017). Perhaps the most dramatic change in Trump's 2020 versus 2016 results are his scores for Conscientiousness. Trump's apparent willingness to play excessive amounts of golf, spend time at his resorts and avoid responsibility for the COVID-19 crisis (Oprysko, 2020) have all likely contributed to the perception that he is not a diligent, hard-working individual. This is a good reminder that what we are measuring are public perceptions of, rather than actual levels of, Trump's personality. Personality is normally a relatively stable trait, so Trump's precipitous drop in C either reflect a greater awareness of his actual C or a gross misrepresentation of his public level of work. Given that the information supporting these lower levels comes from within his own administration (McCammond & Swan, 2019), we prefer the former explanation.

The lower values of C, in combination with low A and H bring Trump's personality closer to that of an individual with psychopathic traits, although his Fearfulness scores prevent that label from strongly applying to him (Book et al., 2016). Any suggestion that he does not have psychopathic and narcissist traits, but is rather a clever Machiavellian, are cast into extreme doubt by his extremely low scores on Agreeableness and Conscientiousness. In comparison, Joe

Biden looks like a relatively average individual who lacks the negative traits of Clinton and, especially, Trump. We acknowledge that other factors (e.g., Supreme Court vacancies or the economy) may weigh more with voters than a president's personality. In other words, the deeds might outweigh the person (Jeffress, 2016). Such decisions are the prerogative of democratic voters and as such, are beyond the purview of this manuscript. That said, we wish to reiterate our considerable surprise over how closely Trump's personality traits overlap with psychopathic and, especially, narcissistic tendencies.

Limitations

It is possible that we had no experts in our sample who would consider themselves politically right wing, given that all described themselves as politically center or left or did not respond to the item. Hyatt et al. (2018) found that Trump and Clinton voters showed considerable disagreements in their Big Five personality ratings of the candidates. However, Wright and Tomlinson (2018) reported that Clinton voters rated Trump's personality somewhat more favourably (i.e., higher Agreeableness and Conscientiousness) than did the sample of experts in U.S. politics in another investigation (Nai & Meier, 2018). Interestingly, the differences between political affiliation and ratings appears to significantly diminish when measures of personality disorder (e.g., narcissism) were used (Fiala et al., 2016; Hyatt et al., 2018). Importantly, 2016 personality experts' ratings resembled those of independent voters more than they did either Trump or Clinton voters (Visser et al., 2017). In that year, Trump supporters rated him as very sincere and her as very insincere with the reverse being true for Clinton supporters (Bump, 2016). In contrast, and in agreement with independent voters, 2016 expert HEXACO raters did not hesitate in assigning very negative personality attributes to

Clinton, unlike Clinton supporters (Bump, 2016) or expert raters in other studies (Nai & Maier, 2018). We are similarly confident in the independence of our 2020 HEXACO experts' ratings.

Furthermore, we invited researchers with expertise in the HEXACO with no restrictions on nationality. This may help address problems that exist within general population samples of American voters (Hyatt et al., 2018; Wright & Tomlinson, 2018). Importantly, there is evidence that experts and laypeople from outside of the United States are less biased by political leanings in their ratings of presidential personality traits (Nai & Maier, 2019). Thus, our use of an international panel of expert raters may have, as in previous research (Visser et al., 2017), allowed for ratings more consistent with an independent viewpoint. The current authors identify themselves as Canadian left-leaning (1) and independent (2; i.e., have voted for liberal and conservative governments) voters.

Further, our raters might have known less about Biden's personality traits than about Trump's. Despite a lengthy political career and eight years as American vice-president, there has been less attention to Biden's personality than to Trump's. There have been two detailed biographies of the president during his term (Woodward, 2018; 2020) as well as a biography from his niece (Trump, 2020). Therefore, it seems possible that our observers had less material to inform their observations of Biden's personality. Once again though, we note that we are not claiming to measure the true personalities of either Trump or Biden. That would require our raters to have intimate knowledge of both candidates that they did not have. However, they had the same access to public personas as do American voters, rendering our results valid for political analyses and for informing public debate. As noted by Lilienfeld and colleagues (2018), it is important for psychologists to contribute their expertise to public discourse so long as professional boundaries and limitations are respected.

We therefore reiterate that the purpose of our study is to examine how personality experts rate the personality profiles of Biden and Trump, in comparison to previous 2016 ratings. In so doing, several patterns are clear. Of the four candidates (Trump 2016, Trump 2020, Clinton 2016 and Biden 2020), Biden's public persona is the most prosocial. His is also in many ways a very average profile, which may contribute to the apparent lack of enthusiasm some have for Biden. On the other hand, his traits (especially his modest O) also suggests that he is unlikely to be the bearer of radical change that some people fear he might be. In contrast, Trump's personality profile is exceptionally antisocial and mirrors the traits associated with subclinical narcissism and most of the traits of subclinical psychopathy (Book et al., 2016). In comparison to 2016, Trump's public personality profile has become less Agreeable, Extraverted and (especially) Conscientious while his Emotionality (primarily Fearfulness) has increased and his Honesty-Humility has remained extremely low. This paints a very unflattering profile of the current president and suggests that if elected, it will likely be because of factors other than his personality (e.g., Jeffress, 2016).

Table 1. *HEXACO-PI factor and facet descriptives for Biden and Trump*

	Biden	Trump	Norm	SD	Biden Percentile	Trump Percentile
Honesty-Humility	2.94	1.32	3.05	0.65	43.47	0.40
Sincerity	2.20	2.07	3.19	0.78	10.32	7.52
Fairness	3.48	1.18	3.08	1.01	65.30	3.01
Greed Avoidance	2.80	1.05	2.57	0.99	59.01	6.18
Modesty	3.30	1.00	3.36	0.79	46.74	0.14
Emotionality	2.87	2.62	2.84	0.54	52.16	34.53
Fearfulness	2.32	3.43	2.60	0.75	35.35	86.63
Anxiety	2.59	2.43	2.94	0.73	31.63	24.32
Dependence	3.07	3.05	2.84	0.80	61.23	60.13
Sentimentality	3.50	1.59	2.98	0.72	76.49	2.68
Extraversion	4.07	3.87	3.56	0.60	80.15	69.69
Social Self Esteem	4.18	3.95	3.87	0.66	68.17	55.10
Social Boldness	4.14	4.57	3.20	0.87	85.91	94.21
Sociability	4.30	3.52	3.56	0.82	81.51	48.19
Liveliness	3.66	3.43	3.39	0.75	64.01	52.22
Agreeableness	3.30	1.19	3.08	0.67	62.93	0.25
Forgiveness	3.18	1.18	2.92	0.83	62.38	1.81
Gentleness	3.41	1.20	3.34	0.85	53.24	0.60
Flexibility	3.41	1.16	2.78	0.89	76.02	3.43
Patience	3.20	1.25	3.27	0.89	47.07	1.16
Conscientiousness	3.45	1.11	3.21	0.66	64.45	0.07
Organization	3.00	2.30	3.06	0.90	39.98	5.05
Diligence	3.43	2.59	3.64	0.82	82.56	27.01
Perfectionism	3.95	1.77	3.13	0.88	49.03	6.41
Prudence	3.43	1.94	3.02	0.82	66.02	10.73
Openness	3.16	2.23	3.14	0.65	51.06	8.01
Aesthetic Appreciation	3.30	1.36	2.78	0.95	70.63	6.80
Inquisitiveness	3.75	2.01	3.20	0.92	72.50	9.71
Creativity	2.68	1.64	3.34	0.85	21.94	2.25
Unconventionality	2.90	1.50	3.24	0.72	31.91	0.78
Altruism/Antagonism	3.64	2.41	3.63	0.72	50.35	4.50

Table 2

HEXACO scores for Biden (2020), Trump (2016), Trump (2020), and Clinton (2016)

	Biden	2020 Trump	2016 Trump	2016 H. Clinton
H	2.94	1.32	1.32	2.39
E	2.87	2.62	2.29	2.79
X	4.07	3.87	4.21	3.81
A	3.30	1.19	1.45	2.69
C	3.45	1.11	2.73	3.87
O	3.16	2.23	2.45	3.46

Figure 1. HEXACO profiles

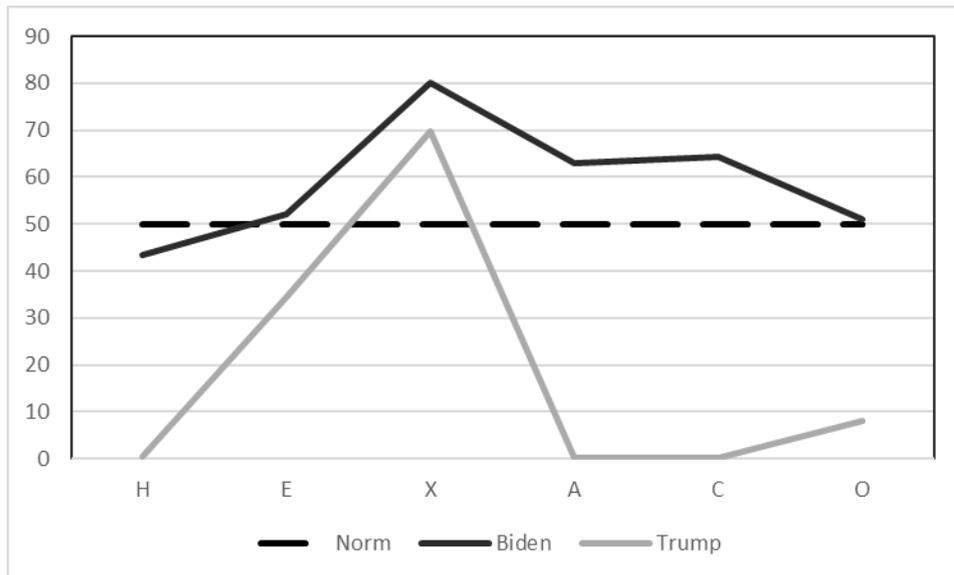


Figure 2. Honesty-Humility facet level profiles

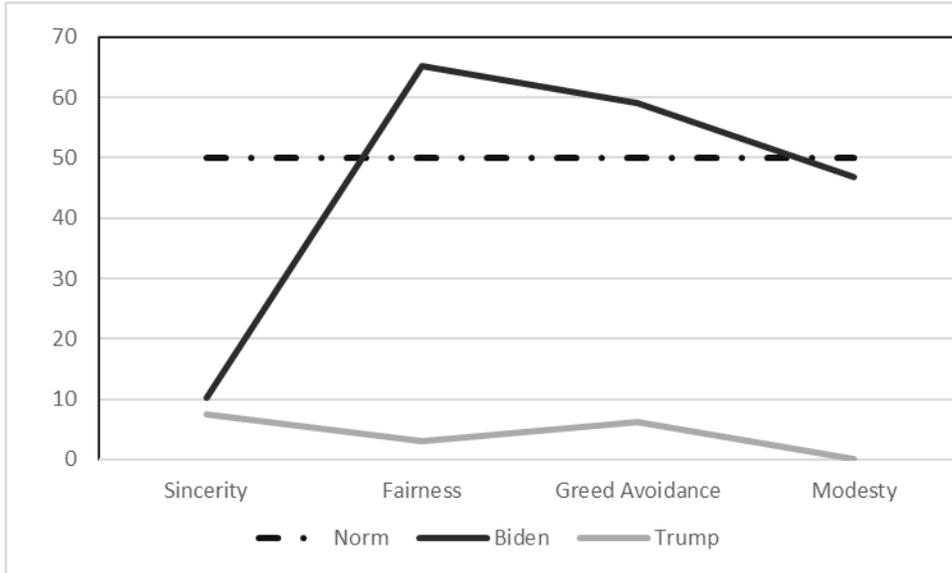


Figure 3. Emotionality facets

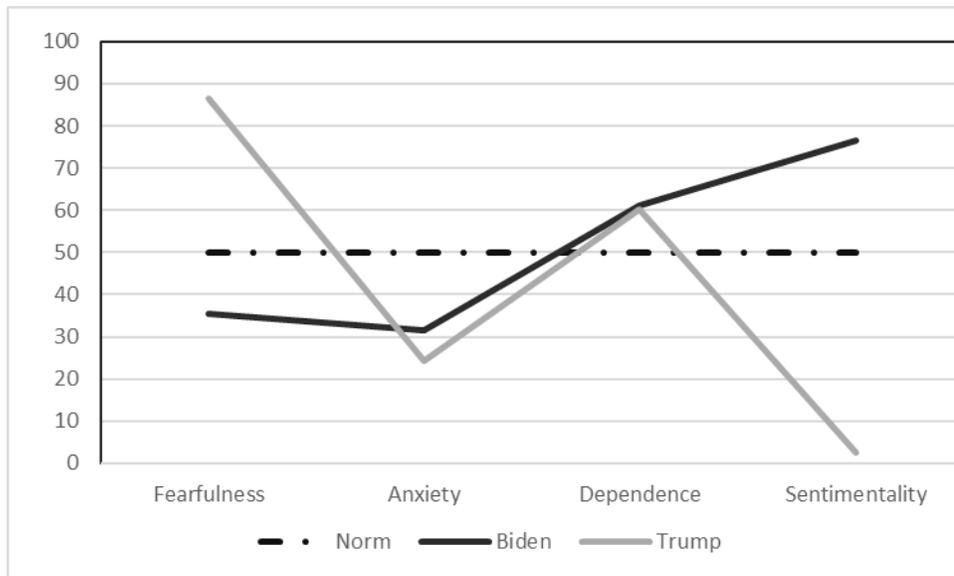


Figure 4. Extraversion facets

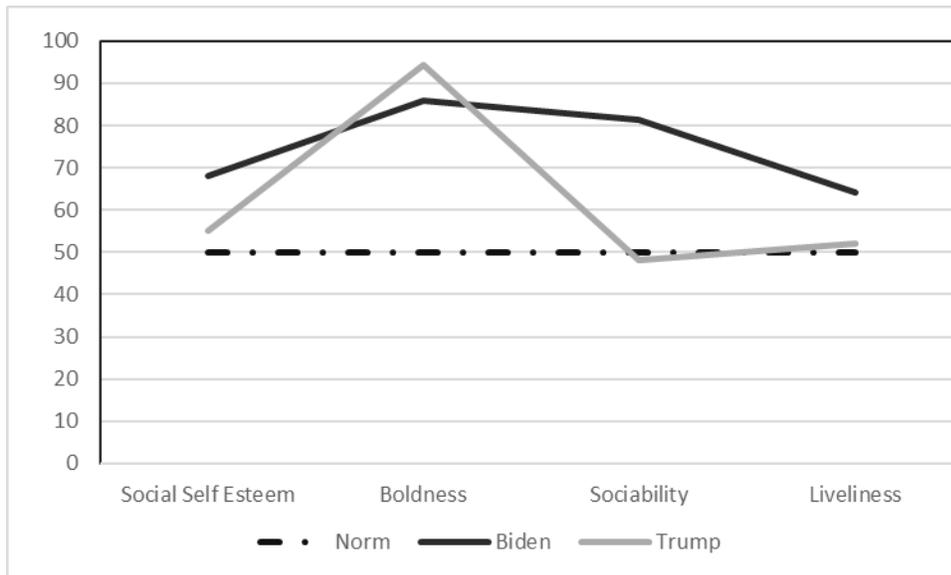


Figure 5. Agreeableness facets

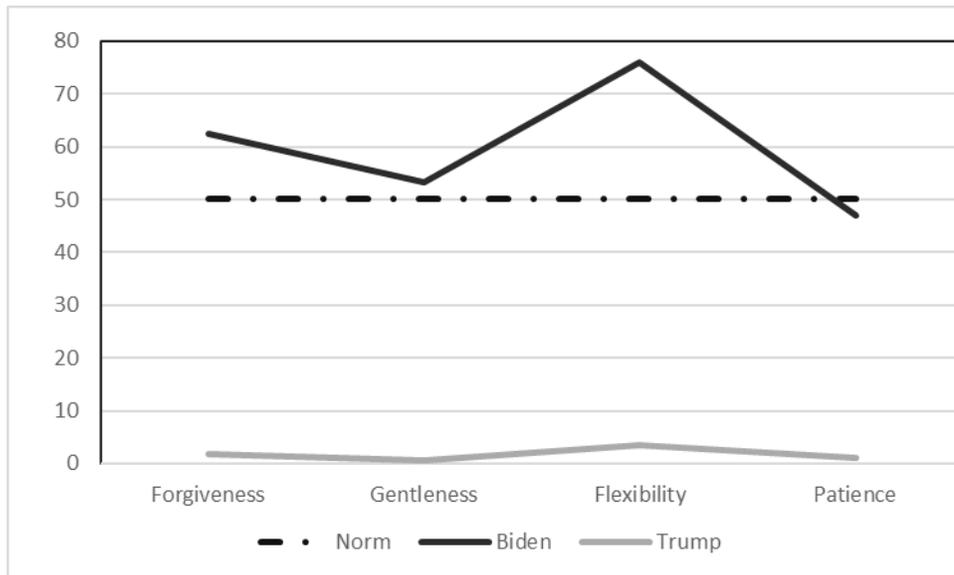


Figure 6. Conscientiousness facets

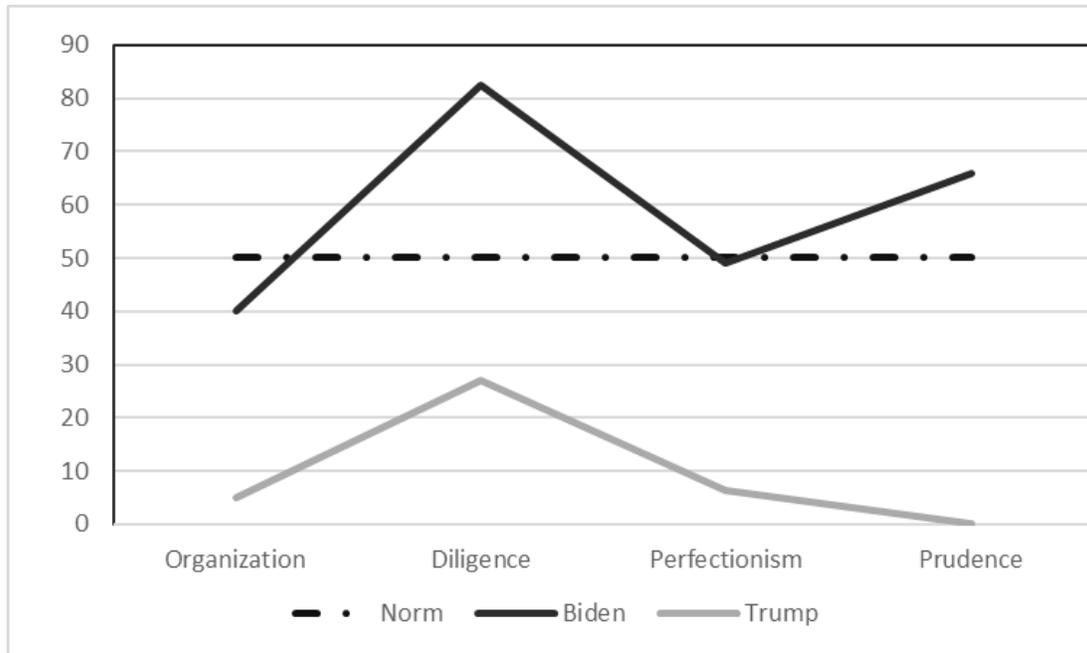
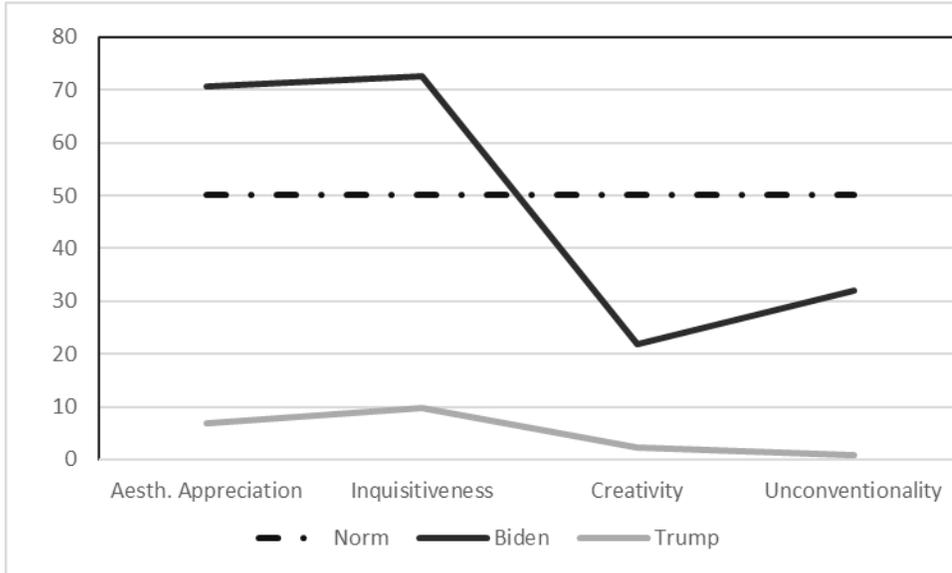


Figure 7. Openness to Experience facets



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