Effects of Expert Ideology on Expert Personality Judgements of Political Figures: A Commentary

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The judgements of academic experts on the personalities of political figures are affected by ideological homogeneity of raters and the use of measures hindered by embedded political content. As long as these problems persist, the academic expert personality profiling of political figures is a futile enterprise. Editors and reviewers would be wise to require authors to provide evidence of ideological heterogeneity in samples of raters, evidence of objectivity in ratings, and evidence that measures do not have embedded political content.

ideological bias, political bias, personality assessment, psychobiography, Donald Trump

This is a working version of a brief commentary that reflects my thoughts on the practice of using academic experts to profile the personalities of political figures. This is an updated version based upon feedback from J. Christopher Cohrs and two anonymous reviewers at the *Journal for Social and Political Psychology*. The reviews received are posted in full at the end of this preprint. Despite the accusation of one reviewer, I am **not** a Russian troll seeking to cast doubt on Western social science. However, I do think casting doubt on Western social science is perfectly reasonable given a) how ideological homogeneity negatively impacts the validity of social science and b) the inability of social scientists to replicate their bold findings.

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In 2017, Yale psychiatrist Bandy Lee coauthored the bestselling book, “The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 27 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President.” This book, an example of the political pandering of experts, is not new. In 1964, *Fact* magazine published “1189 Psychiatrists Say Goldwater Is Psychologically Unfit to Be President”. Mainstream psychobiographies were incredibly popular during the Nixon era too, which were rife with politically biased reductive portraits devoid of any reasonable scientific study of personality (Greenberg, 2004). As Greenberg notes, the experts “...filtered his actions through their own political judgments...” (2004, p. 250). In response to psychobiographer James David Barber, political historian James Patterson wrote, “Scratch Barber, and you will find a liberal Democratic partisan” (Patterson, 1973, p. 64). None of this should come as a surprise given what psychologists understand about politically biased information processing, in which individuals engage in motivated political reasoning to support their own perspectives (Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018). For example, academic experts, who are almost exclusively politically left of center, may be motivated to portray liberal political figures in the most socially desirable light, while portraying conservative political figures in the least socially desirable light because they prefer the politics of the former over the latter.

Academic expert political pandering is being increasingly propped up by research in mainstream psychology and political science journals—one aspect of a broader radical liberal culture in the social sciences (Crawford & Jussim, 2018). There is a history of published personality judgements of political figures (Rubenzer, Faschingbauer, & Ones, 2000; Simonton, 1986) and psychologists and political scientists have not hesitated to lend their expertise to profiles of Donald Trump (Nai & Maier, 2018; Visser, Book, & Volk, 2017). Visser et al. rightfully point out that there were no right-of-center raters in their expert sample and question

whether experts on the political right would rate Donald Trump in the same way. The answer is found in the supplemental materials of Nai and Maier (2018). After regressing the political ideology of expert raters on their personality scores of Donald Trump, these authors say, “We can confidently exclude any substantial ideological bias” (p. 81). However, their analyses undermine their own claim. Table A3 of their supplemental materials reveal large differences in liberal experts’ ratings of Trump’s agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience, and narcissism relative to political moderate academic experts. Liberal academic experts rate Donald Trump substantially lower in agreeableness ($d = -.73$), conscientiousness ($d = -.83$), and openness to experience ($d = -.88$), and rate Trump substantially higher in narcissism ($d = 1.14$). *These are large effects in the social sciences by any reasonable standard.*

Once again, if we scratch the experts, we find liberal partisans. As well as Visser et al. (2017), Nai and Maier (2018) used a substantially skewed liberal sample of raters ($M = 3.6/10$, $SD = 1.58$) resulting in the personality profiles we should expect from such a skewed sample. Importantly, the differences in personality profiles of political figures provided by politically liberal and politically moderate academic experts is similar to the differences in personality profiles of political figures provided by politically liberal and politically moderate lay persons. In comparing data from moderates with data from Clinton voters, Wright & Tomlinson (2018) suggest that there are substantial differences in personality profiles of Donald Trump provided by Clinton voters and political moderates, such that Clinton voters perceive Trump as less agreeable ($d = -.32$), conscientious ($d = -.85$), open to experience ($d = -.66$), and emotionally stable ($d = -.57$) relative to political moderates. Liberal academic experts are no less ideologically influenced when it comes to rating Donald Trump’s personality than liberal non-experts. If anything, the non-experts may be less influenced by their own ideologies given the

smaller effect sizes in the difference between liberals and moderates among lay people relative to academic experts. Importantly, conservative raters are also motivated to rate their preferred political figures in more socially desirable ways relative to moderate raters (Wright & Tomlinson, 2018) but this isn't a problem in the academic expert judgments since academics in the social sciences are largely left of center. Any aggregated effects of ideology will skew ratings in favor of liberal political figures.

The field of psychology has a substantial skew to the left of the political spectrum, as does academia more broadly (Inbar & Lammers, 2012; Langbert, Quain, & Klein, 2016). However, the 33:1 (Left:Right) skew within the field of history is one of the most ideologically skewed in academia (Langbert et al., 2016). Should we expect historians to be any less ideologically influenced than psychologists and political scientists? Rubenzer et al. (2000) had historians assess the personalities of 41 U.S. presidents and attempted to determine what personality traits are associated with presidential greatness, as determined by expert opinion of historians. It should probably come as no surprise to personality psychologists that the most highly correlated personality trait with presidential greatness is openness to experience—the same trait consistently linked to liberal ideology (Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008). Of course, these ratings of presidential greatness are determined by an ideologically skewed sample of historians so the greatest of presidents will, of course, be the more liberal presidents (Uscinski & Simon, 2011). After all, research on motivated political reasoning (Van Bavel & Pereira, 2018) suggests that liberal raters should be motivated to confirm what they already believe—that liberal politicians are “greater” presidents than conservative ones. From the Ridings and McIver rankings used in Rubenzer et al. (2000)¹, one can calculate the average rankings for modern

¹ See rankings here: <https://spot.colorado.edu/~mcguire/greatpres>

presidents² and compare average ranking of Democrats versus Republicans. On average, Democrats rank 13 places higher than Republicans—similar to the difference of 10 places found by Uscinski and Simon (2011) using different data. In short, liberal historians rank liberals as greater presidents and associate a more liberal trait (openness to experience) to presidential greatness.

The influence of ideology on personality profiles of psychologists, political scientists, and historians is not the only problem with personality profiling of political figures. The personality scales have ideology embedded within their items. Charney (2015) points out that multiple items within the openness to experience construct in the NEO-PI-R embody liberal ideological values. For example, it embeds traditional conservative moral values with, “I believe the new morality of permissiveness is no morality at all.” Should it then be any surprise that liberal historians rank political leaders more favorably when those leaders share their moral values? This embedding of political content within openness to experience is true of other scales as well. The recently published IPIP-NEO-60 contains “Tend to vote for liberal political candidates” and “Believe in one true religion” (reversed scored) as openness to experience items (Maples-Keller et al., 2019). This does not appear to be as true of some scales such as the TIPI (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003), which shows substantially smaller correlations with political ideology than the NEO-PI-R (Carney et al., 2008). Though even in that case, items such as, “conventional, uncreative” are not detached from the political. What is “conventional” if not traditional (i.e., conservative)?

² Following Uscinski and Simon (2011), modern presidents begin with McKinley because this period reflects the stable party system still in use today. The Ridings and McIver rankings end with George H.W. Bush.

In a prior editorial decision, J. Christopher Cohrs argues that my criticism that personality measures including political content ignores that political ideology is an aspect of personality itself. Thus, he argues that if a personality measure is to comprehensively measure personality, and ideology is a part of personality, then including clearly ideological items in personality scales is not problematic. What Cohrs ignores is that this creates tautological relationships. For example, you cannot logically argue that political conservatism is inversely associated with openness to experience if your openness to experience measure is, in part, a measure of political liberalism. In that case, the argument becomes, “political conservatism is inversely associated with political liberalism”—a trivial and tautological statement. Though, this is exactly what occurs in research that examines how personality traits are correlated with political ideology (see Carney et al., 2008).

While I suggest that personality profiling of political figures by homogenous samples of academic liberals using personality measures embedded with political content is a futile enterprise, here I make a caveat to this general position. In part, it depends upon the purpose of the profiling. Commonly, the profiles are descriptions of the character of political figures according to liberal academic experts, which are used to make comparisons across political figures (Nai & Maier, 2018; Nai, Coma, & Maier, 2019). These profiles are taken as accurate assessments by these authors. For example, Nai et al., (2019) state that their ratings from liberal academic experts “provide systematic empirical evidence about Trump’s personality profile (p. 609). The issue is that if liberal expert raters are biased in their assessments and the tools used are biased then accurate conclusions cannot be drawn.

Alternatively, there are cases in which the skew of the expert samples may not be of concern. For example, if the purpose of research were simply to examine the correlations

between personality traits of political figures and other outcomes variables (e.g., Rice, Rempel, & Mondak, 2020), the skew of expert raters will have little influence on those correlations. The greatest issue is when making comparative claims between political candidates or “types” of political candidates. Regardless, there is little reason to use expert ratings of the personality of political figures when other more accurate methods exist. Recent examples suggest good response rates from political figures in completing their own self-reported personality using standard measures, such as the HEXACO (e.g., Schumacher & Zettler, 2019). While other reports are common in the personality literature and, in general, other reports and self reports of personality do show strong correlations (Lee & Ashton, 2018), the convergence of self and other reports depends upon level of acquaintanceship (Lee & Ashton 2017). The highest correspondence comes from dyads that know each other “extremely well” and substantial reductions in correspondence occurs even for those that are still moderately acquainted (Lee & Ashton 2017). Considering that academic experts do not personally know the political figures they are rating at all, it isn’t difficult to hypothesize that correspondence between self and expert reports would be particularly low. If other reports are to be useful, they need to come from individuals who have direct knowledge of the political figures being studied and this is possible to accomplish. Rice et al. (2020) collected data from U.S. Senate insiders—individuals who know Senators personally and have worked with them in multiple capacities and settings, which has a much greater capacity to provide accurate informations about the personalities of political figures.

In general, personality profiling of political figures by academic experts is conducted by ideologically homogenous samples that are substantially influenced by their own ideology in their ratings and rankings using measures with ideologically embedded content. So long as these

problems persist, the profiling of political figures by academic experts is a futile enterprise, likely reflecting motivated political reasoning. Editors and reviewers would be wise to require authors to provide evidence of ideological heterogeneity in expert samples, evidence that rater ideology does not have undue influence on ratings, and evidence that personality measures do not have embedded political content. In cases where this is not evident, editors and reviewers should not burden the literature with ideological baggage that further undermines the credibility of psychologists, political scientists, or academia more broadly.

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From: J. Christopher Cohrs cohrcs@staff.uni-marburg.de
Subject: [JSPP] Editor Decision
Date: October 29, 2019 at 6:59 AM
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JC

Dear Joshua Wright,

Thank you for your submission to the Journal of Social and Political Psychology, titled "Ideological Bias in Expert Personality Assessment of Political Figures: A Commentary".

First of all, I would like to apologize that it has taken so long to get back to you. I have been waiting for a third review, but unsuccessfully so I now have to make a decision based on two reviews that I have received. Of course, I have also carefully read the manuscript myself.

Both reviewers have somewhat contrasting views on your commentary. I agree that your general point is interesting and important. However, I also agree with Reviewer B that your commentary is too polemic and at times imprecise (rather than scholarly), and I think your commentary misses out on explaining the purpose(s) of expert ratings to start with, i.e. what do expert ratings intend to measure (see Reviewer A's comments)? In my understanding, this is not always (or mostly) a politician's personality, but rather (as the titles of some of the cited references say) a "public persona" or "perceived personality".

Second, as Reviewer B argues, there are many other ways of personality assessment of political figures that are not dealt with in your commentary, which renders its framing too general.

Third, to add my own observations, you seem to use the term "bias" without explanation what this is supposed to mean. From discussions of the "kernel of truth hypothesis" regarding stereotypes, it becomes clear that the very notion of bias can be problematic (especially if the research goal is not even to measure the "real" personality of a politician, but rather something projected or something perceived).

Fourth, to me, your criticism that personality measures include political or ideological content seems to ignore that political ideology or orientation may be an aspect of personality itself. If a personality measure claims to be a comprehensive measure of personality and ideology is, in part, reflected in personality (as a large research body suggests), then how can a personality measure be entirely free of ideological content?

We are sorry that we do not have more positive news for you. We hope our comments are useful and wish you good luck with your further endeavors.

Kind regards,

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REVIEWER A

This comment raises an interesting point: expert surveys of personality suffer from ideological bias. The author discusses work in personality psychology as well as history. As it is a comment, I do have some suggestions to clarify the argument. I also disagree with the conclusion of the author but the author might as well as disagree with me on that. It is a comment. I also have a couple of suggestions of broadening the point. But I am not trying to be a co-author here. Finally, I have a suggestion for the editor: I think it would be interesting to invite scholars who have used expert surveys of personality to respond to this commentary. Perhaps, Nai & Maier or Visser et al. could be invited to respond? Posting their response to the comment would give readers a nice overview of the discussion.

I have three things that need to be clarified

I have three things that need to be clarified.

First, the authors write that Nai & Maier's "supplemental materials reveals large effects of ideological bias for the liberal expert's ratings of Trump's agreeableness ($d = .73$), conscientiousness ($d = .83$), openness to experience ($d = .88$), and narcissism ($d = 1.14$).” Yes, these are large effects. But how are the results biased. It might be me, but “large effects” does not tell me much about the direction of the effect.

Second, the author writes that “Comparing data from moderates with data from Clinton voters from Wright & Tomlinson (2018), liberal bias effects are smaller for agreeableness ($d = .32$), but similar for conscientiousness ($d = .85$) and openness to experience ($d = .66$).” First, I wonder what is the direction of the effect here. Second, it is not clear whether the author did this? Or the authors named here? If the author did this, this needs more information. What was the sample, what was the study, etc.

Third, just to clarify, did the author calculate the ranking of Presidents belonging to the sentence “On average, Democrats rank 13 places higher than Republicans”. Or did others do this? The sentence and footnote are unclear about this.

Fourth, The author cites some of the work using expert surveys. I think it would be good to be complete here. I have seen some more papers from the team around Nai. Also, I believe that Van Hiel & Roets (2009) have done some of this work. I think it would be good to get a complete overview of the studies that do this. The reader could see the scope to which this method is now used.

As I said, the conclusion of the author is strong. Personally, I am not convinced that this comment convincingly shows that “the expert personality profiling of political figures is a futile enterprise—a parlor trick” as the author concludes. I think the author needs to clarify for what purpose the use of experts surveys is useful. Let me clarify my point: for a correlation between a trait X and outcome Y, it does not matter much that there is some skewness in the distribution of the trait X. Even if this skewness can be explained by ideology or another observed or unobserved variable. Yet, I think the author does have a point when a study wants to conclude that President X has a personality of Y or scores higher than President Z. If the measure of the personality trait is biased, then the conclusions will be influenced.

I have a couple of points that the author could consider:

I would like to stimulate the author a bit on why expert surveys are useful. One of the original argument was that politicians would not answer this kind of surveys. Yet, recent examples by Schumacher & Zietler (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191886918306718>), Norgaard & Klemmensen (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jopy.12388>), Boeggild et al. in Party Politics (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1354068819855703?journalCode=ppqa>) show high response rates for politicians in Denmark and the UK. If this is the case, why rely upon these “biased” ratings from experts.

I agree with the author that measures of personality occasionally tap into political constructs as the author describes for Openness. The author points out that the TIPI – often used in expert surveys – suffers less from this problem. I agree. Yet, a point of concern that I have with the TIPI is that it has very poor psychometric properties. Gosling already advised against using it unless you want to get a broad impression of personality. But recent work (Bakker & Leles, 2018; Credé, Harms, Niehorster, & Gaye-Valentine, 2012) shows that using brief personality measures the conclusions you reach are often different from using larger measures. Bakker & Leles as well as Credé et al. show that adding a few more items already improves the predictive validity a lot. Given that experts time is not super valuable, I have always worried why expert surveys satisfy with these brief measures, while this comes at the cost of the psychometric properties. I don't know if the author wants to make this point, but I would welcome it as this comment is essentially a critical assessment of the expert survey literature.

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REVIEWER B

This paper is polemic rather than scholarly. Its first two sentences contain serious errors of fact—errors that could easily have been checked by a careful author: (1) Bandy Lee is associated with Yale University, not Harvard. (2) The 1964 article about psychiatrists' views of Goldwater was published in the *Fact* magazine, not *The New Republic*. The paper is filled with imprecise, slang, and other anti-scholarly words ("pandering," "proclamations," "parlor trick." The phrase "personality assessment" in the title is misleading, since the paper considers only judgments of traits, and neglects other forms of at-a-distance personality assessment.

Some claims are simply absurd. For example, that Donald Trump's high narcissism and low agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to experience are nothing but the superstructure of raters' liberal political orientation (p. 3) either doesn't know the meaning of those concepts, or else has been asleep for the past few years. Or perhaps is really a Russian troll, seeking to cast doubt on western social science.

I cannot recommend it for publication in JSPP. Nor do I judge that it could be revised to be publishable.

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