

Personality and Isolationism: Content Analysis of Senatorial Speeches

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Previous research indicates that isolationists (persons opposed to aid or commitments to other nations) exhibit many features of the authoritarian personality, including intolerance of ambiguity and cognitive inconsistency, dichotomous thinking, strong positive affect toward in-groups and strong negative affect toward out-groups. This study uses content analysis methods to assess personality characteristics of United States senators who were classified (by Guttman scaling of foreign policy votes) as isolationist, ambivalent isolationist, or nonisolationist. As predicted, isolationists made significantly less complex policy statements and expressed significantly more positive in-group and negative out-group attitudes than did nonisolationists. Ambivalent isolationists tended to fall between these two groups. The results illustrate how content analysis methods can be used to test the generality of psychological hypotheses in high-level political settings in which more traditional measurement approaches are not feasible.

To what extent do personality variables influence high-level political decisions? Frequently debated but infrequently resolved, this issue has received a great deal of theoretical attention (e.g., Etheredge, 1978; Greenstein, 1975; Holsti, 1976; Knutson, 1973). Some argue that important decision makers are so tightly constrained by their roles that they have little discretionary power. Others argue that there often remains considerable room for individual preferences and styles to influence policy choices.

It is useful to distinguish two complementary approaches that researchers have taken to this issue: intensive case studies and quantitative multicase studies. The case study or "psychobiography" literature is enormous—national leaders as disparate as Alexander the Great, Bismarck, Disraeli, Wilson, Hitler, and Gandhi have been topics of investigation (see reviews of Glad, 1973; Greenstein, 1975). Work in this tradition has, however, been haunted by complex conceptual and methodological problems. Critics

have noted that psychobiographers often fail to consider possible situational or role explanations of behavior. They have also pointed to the unsettling willingness of some investigators to offer impressionistic personality assessments on the basis of fragmentary data, without explicating the standards of evidence and inference employed (Greenstein, 1975; Tetlock, Crosby, & Crosby, 1981).

The second approach involves developing systematic techniques for assessing the personalities of political leaders on one or more standardized dimensions and using the data thus obtained to predict policy preferences or actions. Unfortunately, there are serious constraints on researchers' access to subjects. Most high-level political leaders are unable or unwilling to respond to conventional measurement instruments such as personality tests or questionnaires.¹ Assessment must be performed "at-a-distance" (Hermann, 1977). To overcome this problem, a number of investigators have turned to various forms of content analysis (see Winter

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¹ An exception to this generalization is the work of Constantini and Craik (1980) who have been successful in getting California delegates to presidential conventions to respond to personality questionnaires. However, these subjects might more accurately be categorized as middle- rather than high-level political elites.

& Stewart, 1977). This approach sacrifices much of the detail and richness of case studies, but also avoids the methodological weaknesses of many current psychobiographies. The rules for collecting and analyzing data are explicit and the predictive power of personality variables can be statistically assessed.

The present study uses content analysis to assess personality correlates of the foreign policy preferences of United States senators. Specifically, the study was designed to test a set of hypotheses derived from McClosky's (1967) work on the psychological underpinnings of isolationism. According to McClosky, the central theme in isolationist thought is opposition to aid or commitments to other nations. To the isolationist, there is no community of international interests, and Americans have little to gain and a lot to lose by participating in international affairs. In its extreme forms, isolationism involves a xenophobic aversion to other nations: the view that the purity and vitality of the United States is threatened by the immorality and corruption of other nations.

Isolationism is not, however, a monolithic ideology. There are different types of isolationism, including the aggressive or jingoistic and the peaceful or conciliatory (McClosky, 1967). The jingoist advocates quick and punitive responses to external threats and seeks to insulate the United States by overwhelming superiority of force. The peaceful isolationist prefers to avoid conflict whenever possible and to withdraw into the North American continent. Because the large majority of isolationist senators in the post-World War II period have been of the aggressive type, we shall focus here primarily on this form of isolationism.

On the basis of three national surveys in the 1950s, in which a large number of personality and attitude scales were administered, McClosky (1967) concluded that isolationists—especially jingoistic ones—differed from nonisolationists on a variety of dimensions. Isolationists were more likely to be intolerant of ambiguity and cognitive inconsistency, to be prone to dichotomous (good vs. bad) forms of thinking, and to have strong positive affect toward in-groups (pa-

triotic Americans) and strong negative affect toward out-groups (political opponents, other nations). McClosky argues that psychodynamic processes similar to those hypothesized to underlie the authoritarian personality (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950) influence the content and structure of isolationist belief systems. For instance, he proposed that the rigidly chauvinistic overtones in isolationism frequently represent attempts to cope with severe inner conflicts and feelings of inferiority.

Our objective was to test the generality of McClosky's psychological portrait of the isolationist on an elite political sample: United States senators. Previous research points to possible content analytic indicators of isolationism. There are two especially promising indicators:

1. A coding system for assessing the conceptual or integrative complexity of political leaders, used successfully in a variety of other archival studies (Levi & Tetlock, 1980; Suedfeld & Rank, 1976; Suedfeld, Tetlock & Ramirez, 1977; Tetlock, 1979, 1981). The coding system is designed to measure the degree to which speakers favor simplistic, black-and-white interpretations of events as opposed to less rigid, more multidimensional forms of thinking (cf. Schroder, Driver, & Streufert, 1967; Streufert & Streufert, 1978, Chapter 2).

2. Evaluative assertion analysis (Osgood, Saporta, & Nunnally, 1956) for measuring the intensity of speakers' attitudes towards particular groups or issues (e.g., in-groups and out-groups).

These content analysis methods were applied to statements given on the Senate floor by senators who had been classified on the basis of voting record as isolationist, ambivalent toward isolationism, or nonisolationist. Past research—using Guttman scaling of voting patterns on foreign policy issues—indicates the existence of systematic individual differences in isolationist orientation among senators (Belknap, 1959; Farris, 1959; Stassen, 1972).² The plan of the present study

² The purpose of Guttman scaling in this context is to test statistically whether it is possible to order a set

was straightforward: to analyze speeches of senators who varied in their commitment to an isolationist foreign policy, and then to examine relationships between the content analysis indicators and isolationism. It was predicted that the more isolationist the voting record of a senator was, the more likely the senator was to show low levels of integrative complexity and strongly positive attitudes toward in-groups and strongly negative attitudes toward out-groups.

Method

Records of speeches given by senators in the 82nd Congress (1951-1952) provided the data.³ Inspection of this data base revealed that senators varied substantially in the amount of attention they directed to foreign policy versus other concerns in their speeches. Some senators said little about foreign policy, whereas others were extremely loquacious. Moreover, senators who spoke little on foreign policy tended to vote less frequently on such issues, thus creating some uncertainty about the true policy preferences of these individuals.

We decided therefore to focus on only those senators whom Rosenau (1968) and Stassen (1972) labeled as "articulate" on foreign policy issues (i.e., senators who frequently spoke on this subject). Thirty-five senators were included in the final sample. According to Stassen's (1972) Guttman scaling of legislators' voting on issues relevant to isolationism, 16 of the senators can be clearly classified as nonisolationists, 8 as ambivalent isolationists, and 11 as isolationists.⁴

A total of 10 paragraph-sized statements (all relevant to foreign policy) were randomly selected from the Congressional speeches of each senator. These statements varied in length from 50 to 150 words. There were no significant differences in the lengths of statements sampled from the three groups of senators. There

of senators in such a way that if a senator votes for a moderately isolationist measure, then he or she will certainly vote for less extreme isolationist measures, and that, if the senator fails to endorse a moderately isolationist measure, then he or she will certainly not vote for more extreme isolationist measures. If such a unidimensional ordering is possible, senators and voting issues can be represented in an interlocking order. Each senator can be represented between two policy issues—between the most isolationist measure for which he or she is willing to vote and the least isolationist measure for which he or she is unwilling to vote.

Whether such an interlocking order of senators and issues is possible can be assessed empirically by the reproducibility and scalability coefficients. High levels of reproducibility and scalability indicate that the voting issues measure a simple, consistent attitude dimension (such as isolationism-internationalism). The reproducibility and scalability coefficients reported by previous investigators (e.g., Stassen, 1972) were remarkably high: .99 and .98, respectively.

were only weak relationships between the length of statements and the content analysis indicators (all r s $< .15$ and $> -.15$).

Integrative Complexity Coding

All material was scored for integrative complexity on a 7-point scale (see Schroder et al., 1967, Appendix 2, for a detailed discussion of the coding rules). The scale defines complexity in terms of both differentiation and integration. Differentiation refers to the number of aspects or dimensions of a problem that are recognized and taken into account in decision making. For instance, a decision maker may process information relating to policy options in an undifferentiated fashion by placing options into only one of two categories: the "good, patriotic" policies and the "bad, defeatist" policies. A more differentiated approach would recognize that policy options can have multiple, often contradictory effects that cannot be classified on a single evaluative dimension of judgment—for example, effects on different political constituencies, various sectors of the economy, military strength, and the strategies of one's opponents. Integration refers to the development of complex connections among differentiated characteristics. (Differentiation is thus a prerequisite of integration.) The complexity of integration depends on whether the dimensions of judgment employed by the decision maker are perceived to operate in isolation (low integration), in simple interactions (the effects of A on C depend on levels of B—

³ The decision to focus on the 82nd Congress was largely based on two considerations: (a) there was a great deal of controversy over the role that the United States should play on the international scene and (b) there is a sophisticated research literature on foreign policy voting patterns in the 82nd Congress.

⁴ The following Senate votes defined the isolationism dimension: opposing a convention on relations with West Germany; opposing a security pact with Japan; opposing a peace treaty with Japan favoring the United Nations and limiting U.S. sovereignty over Japanese foreign policy (four different votes); cutting European economic aid by \$500 million; cutting European economic aid by \$250 million; opposing sending troops to Europe without Congressional approval; requiring that all aid to India be a loan, not a grant, and requiring India to provide strategic materials to the U.S. in return; and opposing restoring the foreign aid bill to the full \$8.5 billion requested by the president. Senators classified as isolationist almost always took these positions on these issues; senators classified as nonisolationist almost always took the opposite positions. The following Senators were classified as nonisolationists: Benton, Connally, Douglas, Fulbright, Gillette, Humphrey, Kefauver, Knowland, Lehman, McMahon, Morse, O'Mahoney, Smith, Sparkman, Thye, and Wylie; as ambivalent isolationists: Brewster, Bridges, Cain, Ferguson, Hickenlooper, Mundt, Taft, and Watkins; and as isolationists: Bricker, Capehart, Dirksen, Jenner, Kem, Langer, Malone, McCarran, McCarthy, Walker, and Wherry.

medium integration), or in even more complex contingent patterns (high integration). Scores of 1 reflect low differentiation and low integration. Scores of 3 reflect medium or high differentiation and low integration. Scores of 5 reflect medium or high differentiation and medium integration. Scores of 7 reflect high differentiation and high integration. Scores of 2, 4, and 6 represent transition points between adjacent levels.

Scoring for integrative complexity was performed by the author (who was, of course, aware of the hypotheses) and trained coders who were unaware of the hypotheses (mean interrater agreement, $r = .87$). Disagreements were resolved by adopting the scores of the coders unaware of the hypotheses.

Evaluative Assertion Analysis

Evaluative assertion analysis was performed on the same materials (Osgood et al., 1956, discuss this coding procedure in detail). The analysis involved four basic stages and was performed by coders who were unaware of the hypotheses being examined and (in later stages of the coding) of the source of the material.

The first stage was the identification and isolation of attitude "objects." Two general classes of attitude objects were defined: (a) Individuals, groups, or symbols with whom or which the speaker identifies, and (b) domestic and foreign opponents. A variety of specific terms fell under each category. The former category included the U.S. Constitution, the U.S. armed forces, the American people, General MacArthur, free nations, the policy of standing firm, and democracy. The latter category included communists and their sympathizers (fellow-travelers), the U.S.S.R., Stalin, alien ideologies, appeasers, North Korea, the Peking regime, and totalitarianism. Coders agreed 94% of the time on the identification and classification of terms. Disagreements were resolved by discussion among coders.

The second stage involved translating all sentences in which these attitude objects appeared into either one or both of two common sentence forms: (a) Attitude Object/Verbal Connector/Attitude Object, or (b) Attitude Object/Verbal Connector/Common Meaning Term. For instance, the sentence "Communists threaten peace-loving people" would be translated to read: "Communists/threaten/people. People/are/peace-loving." Coders agreed 88% of the time on how to decompose sentences into this format. Disagreements were resolved by discussion.

In the third stage, the verbal connectors and predicates were rated for intensity and direction on 7-point scales ranging from -3 to +3. A verbal connector received a negative score to the degree it dissociated the subject from the predicate ("totally repudiate" or "never is" would receive scores of -3) and a positive score to the degree it associated the subject and predicate ("totally accepts" or "always is" would receive scores of +3). A common meaning term (predicate) received a negative or positive rating to the degree it represented a "negatively or positively evaluated attribute within the language community of the speaker" (Osgood et al., 1956, p. 47). Reliability checks indicated high levels of

agreement among coders. The judgments of two independent coders correlated .89 and .90 for verbal connectors and common meaning terms, respectively.

The direction and intensity of sentiment directed toward in-groups and out-groups were computed for each paragraph unit. Within each unit, this was done by (a) multiplying the values assigned to verbal connectors and the common meaning terms used to characterize the subject and (b) computing the mean of the products thus obtained. Two scores were obtained in this way for each paragraph: one for the intensity and direction of affect aimed at in-groups, the other for affect aimed at out-groups.

Results

Table 1 presents the mean ratings of isolationist, ambivalent, and nonisolationist senators on each of the three dependent variables: integrative complexity, attitudes toward in-groups, and attitudes toward out-groups. As an initial test of our hypotheses concerning the psychological bases of isolationism, we performed unweighted means analyses of variance on each of these variables. We treated each senator as having only one value on each dependent variable—the mean of the scores assigned to the 10 paragraph units sampled from his speeches.

Analysis of variance of integrative complexity scores revealed highly significant differences among isolationist, ambivalent, and nonisolationist senators, $F(2, 32) = 7.43$, $p < .01$. Pairwise comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that, as predicted, nonisolationists were more integratively complex than isolationists, $q(3, 32) = 4.24$, $p < .05$, and ambivalent isolationists, $q(3, 32) = 4.2$, $p < .05$. There was no significant difference between isolationists and ambivalent isolationists, $q(3, 32) < 1$, *ns*.

Analysis of senators' attitudes toward in-groups revealed a significant overall effect, $F(2, 32) = 6.40$, $p < .01$. As predicted, isolationists had more positive attitudes toward in-groups than did nonisolationists, $q(3, 32) = 4.57$, $p < .05$. There were no significant differences between the in-group attitudes of nonisolationists and ambivalent isolationists or between those of ambivalent isolationists and isolationists.

Analysis of attitudes toward out-groups also indicated strong overall differences

Table 1
Mean Integrative Complexity and Attitude Scores of Senators

Category	Integrative complexity ^a	Attitudes toward in-groups ^b	Attitudes toward out-groups ^c
Isolationists	1.79	.52	-.49
Ambivalent isolationists	1.80	.27	-.30
Nonisolationists	2.55	.16	-.12

^a Higher scores indicate higher levels of integrative complexity.

^b Higher scores indicate more positive attitudes toward in-groups.

^c Lower scores indicate more negative attitudes toward out-groups.

among senators, $F(2, 32) = 4.54, p < .05$. Again, as hypothesized, isolationists had significantly more negative attitudes toward out-groups than did nonisolationists, $q(3, 32) = 3.8, p < .05$. Ambivalent isolationists held attitudes that were not significantly different from those of either isolationists or nonisolationists.

Significant correlations existed between the integrative complexity and evaluative assertion analysis measures. More complex senators tended to evaluate out-groups less negatively, $r(33) = .44, p < .01$, and in-groups less positively, $r(33) = -.48, p < .01$. Senators who evaluated out-groups more negatively also tended to evaluate in-groups more positively, $r(33) = -.47, p < .01$.

We employed discriminant analysis to assess the overall power of our dependent variables to distinguish senators who varied in their commitment to isolationism. One highly significant discriminant function emerged, $\chi^2(6) = 19.57, p < .01$. It accounted for 41% of the total variation and permitted correct classification of 66% of the senators into the isolationist, ambivalent, and nonisolationist categories (against a chance accuracy rate of 37%). The standardized discriminant function coefficients for maximally distinguishing the three groups were the following: integrative complexity, .55; attitudes toward in-groups, -.45; and attitudes toward out-groups, .36. This pattern indicates that isolationist orientation can be best predicted by integrative complexity and, to a somewhat

lesser degree, by attitudes toward in-groups and out-groups.

Discussion

McClosky (1967) argued that post-World War II isolationism represents a posture of belligerency in international affairs—that it “has more to do with hostility against foreign nations and disavowal for the well-being of others than with the considered assessment of the risks arising from foreign entanglements” (p. 104). The isolationist relies heavily upon “dichotomous thought processes, that lack breadth of perspective, and that seek to exclude whatever is different, distant or unfamiliar” (p. 107).

Our data strongly support the applicability of McClosky’s analysis to isolationist senators in the 82nd Congress. Isolationists were much less integratively complex than nonisolationists. Isolationists also showed signs of holding more extreme, polarized attitudes. Relative to nonisolationists, isolationists evaluated out-groups more negatively and in-groups more positively. Ambivalent isolationists tended to fall between the isolationists and nonisolationists on these dependent variables.

Although the findings converge nicely with those of other research (McClosky, 1967), we should not overlook alternative interpretations. One possibility is that the observed differences do not so much reflect variation in personality as variation in styles

of political rhetoric, persuasion, and bargaining. Isolationists were predominantly Republicans who represented a minority viewpoint in Congress and confronted a Democratic president. In contrast, nonisolationists were predominantly Democrats who represented the majority viewpoint in Congress and often had close ties to the Truman administration. The more simplistic, black-and-white tone of isolationist statements may reflect the attempt of an out-of-power minority to impress others with its political determination and will.

Future research might disentangle the personality and political style interpretations by exploring (a) whether members of the minority party in Congress tend to adopt more simplistic, polarized positions on issues than do members of the majority party (who, perhaps, feel more constrained to act "responsibly") and (b) whether members of the party opposed to the president tend to adopt more simplistic, polarized positions on issues than do members of the president's party (who, again, may feel more constrained to act "responsibly").

The problems involved in distinguishing "intrapyschic" from political levels of explanation are by no means unique to this study. They recur in various guises throughout the personality and politics literature.⁵ For instance, a leader's statement may be evidence of either an internal cognitive or motivational process or an attempt to manipulate an important audience and achieve a political objective (Holsti, 1976). It would be naive to pretend that any one investigation will resolve this chronic controversy. A good case can be made, however, that as systematic evidence accumulates indicating that psychological and political variables are related (Etheredge, 1978; Greenstein, 1975; Suedfeld & Rank, 1976; Winter & Stewart, 1977), the burden of proof should shift from those who maintain that psychological explanations contribute to our understanding of high-level political decisions to those who maintain that the available evidence can be explained entirely at institutional levels of analysis.

⁵ Indeed, for that matter, demand characteristics and social desirability response sets are long-standing concerns of conventional social and personality research.

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