

The Power of Personality

- Voting Edition -

In case you've missed it, it's election season in the US and in case you're really out of touch, a lot of people have strong opinions about the incumbent! But what leads to our political opinions? Where do they come from? Did you know that your personality says more about who you're likely to vote for than how much you earn does?

Those of us who work with Personality a lot are familiar with the fact that it has a huge influence on our lives. I use personality all the time; helping leaders understand themselves and their teams, helping whole teams work together more effectively and supporting salespeople in getting their message across. I've become interested in how personality affects our politics.

The general thinking is that how much you earn, and how long you spent in education will be some of the largest factors in who you vote for. As I'm going to show your personality also plays a big part, and in some situations can be even more important. We'll start by looking at what's meant by 'personality'.

The Big Five

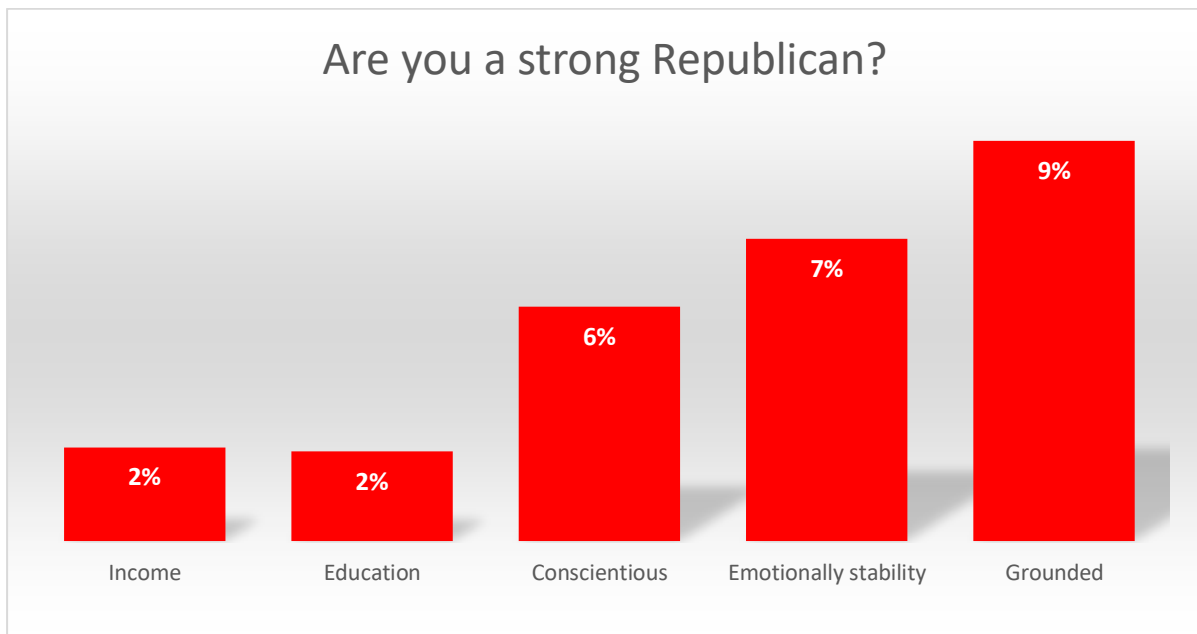
The first way to look at this is through what Psychologists call the 'Big Five', a way of looking at personality that's favoured in research for its detailed approach. If you're more familiar with personality Types (e.g. ISTJ) then I'll get to that in a bit. The Big Five approach says that our personality is best described by positions on five dimensions. For example Extraversion goes from being very reserved, to being very outgoing and so on. Here are all five dimensions:

Low	-	Dimension Name	-	High
Reserved	-	Extraversion	-	Outgoing
Spontaneous	-	Conscientiousness	-	Conscientious
Sensitive	-	Neuroticism	-	Resilient
Cautious	-	Openness to Experience	-	Curious
Challenging	-	Agreeableness	-	Agreeable



Big Five and Politics

A lot of the research¹ in this area has found that there's a strong connection between describing yourself as 'liberal' and your score on 'openness to experience'. The higher you score towards the 'curious' end of the dimension, the more likely you are to view yourself as liberal. But what does that mean for voting? Well a great study by Gerber and friends² has looked at just that question too. They found that personality was actually way more predictive of party affiliation than either education or income:



So, there you have it, our personality is effective at predicting the party we'll vote for. The top predictor of whether or not you would describe yourself as 'very Republican' was being on the 'cautious' end of Openness to Experience. This of course fits with less specific research showing that the other end of the scale 'curious' links to describing yourself as Liberal. As you can see, after that the next highest predictors are being more emotionally stable and more conscientious.

So taking just one of the these factors alone is a better predictor of whether someone is a strong Republican than their income, or their education!

You can of course put these together to form an overall profile³. We can say from this that someone who is conscientious, emotionally stable and grounded is more likely to be Republican, and that someone who is spontaneous, changeable and open minded is more likely to be Democrat.

¹Alford JR, Hibbing, JR. 2007. Personal, interpersonal and political temperaments. *ANNALS Am. Acad. Polit. Soc. Sci.* 614:196-212

²Gerber et al. The Big Five personality Traits in the Political Arena (2011). *The Annual Review of Political Science*

³there is some overlap between bits of the big 5, so you can't just add the percentages together, but it's safe to say that it's likely to be larger than the largest one for these three aspects.

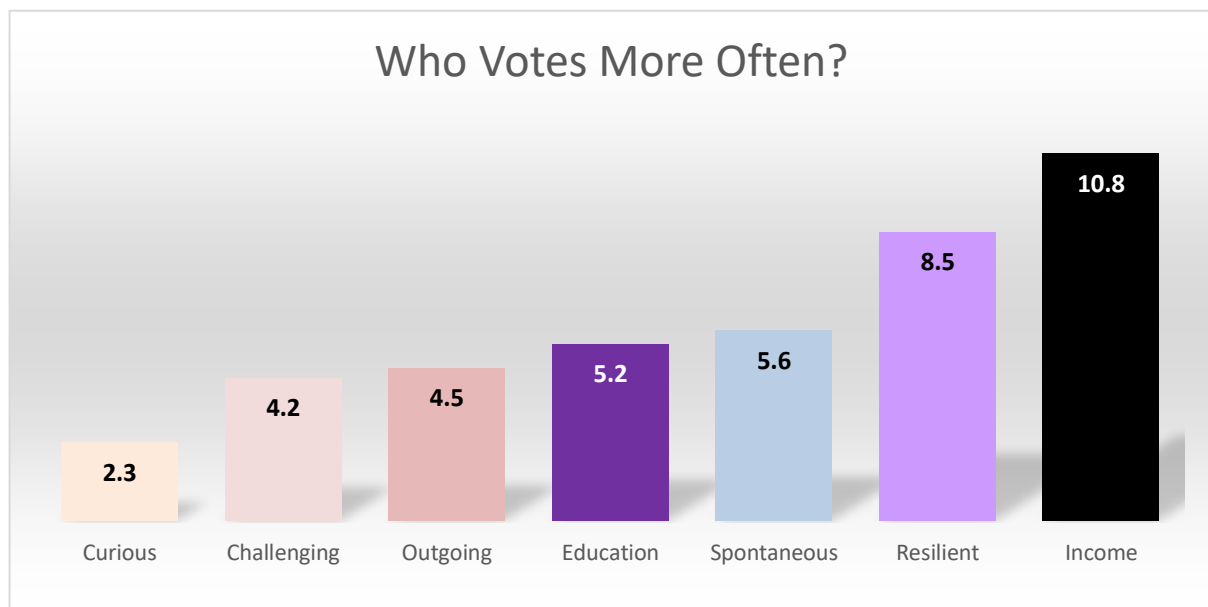


To me this raises some really interesting questions about where our political attitudes come from: nature vs. nurture. Our personality is pretty stable over our lives, so those with certain personalities are always going to find certain political parties more appealing. That's not to mean that it's all predetermined: our family, upbringing, education and the political landscape will also play an important part.

And then there's the all-important question of what people actually do with their political opinions...

Who actually votes?

Yes. It's one thing to have strong ideals, but in a democracy, the decisions get made by those who actually turn up. So who was actually most likely to have voted regularly? The researchers looked at four US elections and saw to what extent Personality affected how likely people were to have actually voted regularly. Here's what they found:



Here income is actually the greatest single predictor of how likely someone is to vote. Behind that though, and before education, we have people who are more resilient, and those who are more spontaneous. This is really interesting, because if you had asked me, I'd guess that the more conscientious people (the opposite of spontaneous) would be the ones to get out there and do it, but actually people are less likely to have voted if they are **more** conscientious. Perhaps they were busy with other commitments, maybe they saw the small effect of voting as not justifying the input.

Again, if you wanted to build a profile of people who are most likely to vote then they would be people with high income, who are resilient, spontaneous, well-educated, outgoing and challenging. I think this profiling becomes really relevant when you start to look in polling data at the difference between registered voters and likely voters, and when trying to understand the behaviour of undecided voters.



This also says to me that persuading more people to vote involves supporting those with lower incomes who are more sensitive and conscientious with lower education, and are more agreeable and reserved.

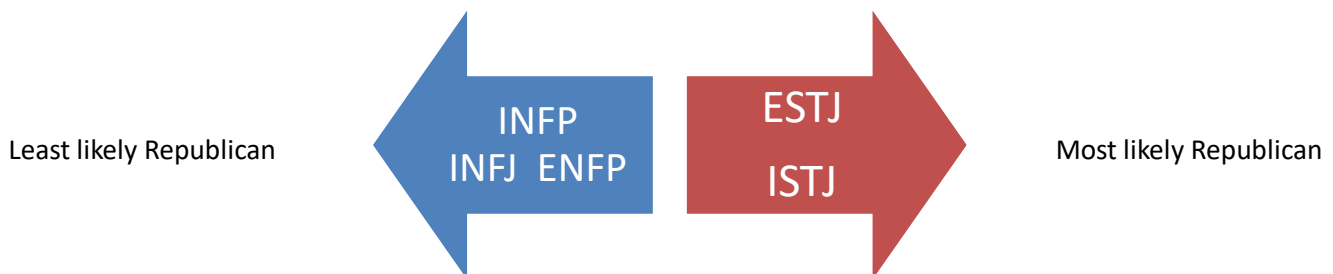
Although I've not come across it, I'd love to see how our personality affects when and how we cast our ballot. A particularly relevant question in the upcoming US election!

What about Personality Types?

I find that the Big Five is great when I'm looking at just one dimension at a time, such as reserved vs. outgoing. When I put them together I find it gets murkier. That's where I really like Personality Types - to shortcut these overall profiles. As always, a quick reminder that just because most ISTJs do something, that doesn't mean that all of them do it. Personality Type is simply a useful way to shortcut the patterns I talked through earlier.

The good news is that there's enormous overlap between the Big Five and personality Types: they measure basically the same thing in different ways. I'm not going to get into the mechanics of that here, but what it means is that we can pull on loads of existing research⁴ to turn Big Five patterns into Types. We can then say which Types are most likely to identify as Republican, and who is most likely to actually vote.

Types most likely to be Republican



I've created these profiles by looking at the patterns coming out from the Big Five research, and linking that to whole Types research. To double check this, I found that it also aligns nicely with some work by Paul Tieger⁵, who measured personality Type directly and found that that _NF_'s were most likely to identify as Liberal, and that _STJs were most likely to identify as Conservative.

⁴MBTI data supplement OPP Ltd.

⁵Unpublished research, but check out *The Art of Speedreading people*. Paul Tieger.



What about whether or not people have voted?

It's worth noting again that I'm mapping the Types to the data above using existing data on the correlations. From that I've mapped the following two Types as best fitting the patterns in the Big Five data.



Well, if you'd asked me I'd have said that the SJs with their high levels of conscientiousness would have voted more often, but here we see that the ISFJs are actually less likely to do so. One interpretation is that they're really attending to the needs of those immediately around them. As for the ENTPs? Well the desire to consider and get involved in something much larger is always there. If it's any support my own preferences are ENTP and I've voted in every election since I was 18. And investigated this research. And written this article about it. After all, what good is research if it doesn't fit us perfectly!

Conclusion

Our Personality affects more than just the sort of leader we are, or how best to influence us at work. It has a huge impact across our entire lives. As these studies show, our Personality can have a greater impact on our politics and our voting than factors such as income or education. It's another reminder for me of the Power of Personality.

About the Writer

Gareth English is a Business Psychologist who has worked with leaders all over the world for the last 20 years to help them to grow faster to achieve their goals.

He is the author of [The Power of Personality](#).

