



# US Presidents' Personalities and Leaderships: In the Cases of William Jefferson Clinton and Barack Obama and Their Health Care Policies

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## Abstract

This study scrutinizes the influence of presidential personality on leadership styles, employing a comparative analysis of William Jefferson Clinton and Barack Obama, specifically in the realm of their healthcare policies. Clinton's high ambition and confidence led to an undisciplined policy agenda, culminating in limited successes in healthcare reform. Conversely, Obama's pragmatic and collaborative leadership facilitated the enactment of the Affordable Care Act, thereby improving healthcare accessibility significantly. The research underscores the dynamic interaction between presidential personality traits and the external environment, illuminating the intricate interconnections between presidential character, leadership styles, and policy results. Further, this study presents an examination of the negotiations, compromises, and strategic decisions involved in healthcare policy-making. By comparatively exploring these two presidents, this investigation provides a nuanced understanding of the interplay between personality, leadership, and policy outcomes in the sphere of health care. This essay evaluated how the distinct personalities of President Clinton and Obama influenced their leadership styles and their impact on their healthcare policies.

## Keywords

US Presidency, Leadership, Health Care Policy

## Introduction

The term "personality" refers to a consistent pattern of functioning that extends across various behaviors and is relatively stable over time. It can be influenced by external events and experiences, as well as learned behaviors from oneself or others. James David Barber's work, "The Presidential Character," introduced the concept of presidential personality, arguing that it can help predict a president's in-office behavior. Barber classified U.S. presidents into four psychological types and his analysis of Nixon predicted his actions during the Watergate scandal. However, scholars like Lowi and Skowronek questioned the efficacy of personality theory in explaining recurring presidential behavior patterns, arguing it does not provide a comprehensive understanding. Addressing this, Renshon introduced the concept of character-based personality traits, representing an individual's true nature, though it can be challenging to observe accurately (Ekstrom, P.D. & Federico, C.M., 2018).

While personality may impact presidential actions, its influence may be limited, particularly with the decline of the "imperial presidency." Some scholars argue that political institutions are more relevant than personality, leading to "neo-institutionalism" in political research. While historical analysis may not always predict future presidential actions, it offers a valuable variable for understanding leadership and related policies. By comparing the personalities, leadership styles, and healthcare policy outcomes under William Jefferson Clinton and Barack Obama, this analysis

aims to examine the enduring impact of personality.

## 1. Case study: W. J. Clinton's leadership

### 1.1 Clinton's personality

Presidents have numerous traits, but not all of these are related to their leadership styles. Renshon proposes that personality traits represent an individual's integrated patterns and include three spheres, the ambition sphere, the identity sphere, and the relational sphere, which are reflected in presidential leadership (Renshon, S., 2019). Firstly, in the ambition sphere, Clinton showed strong ambition. Clinton's political career started when he was selected as a representative to Boy's Nation, sent to Washington D. C., and met John F. Kennedy face-to-face. He thought this time was the most defining moment of his life because the event ignited his political ambitions (Penning, J.M., 2018).

It could come from his father's death: "For a long time, I thought I would have to live for both of us in some ways... It gave me an urgent sense to do everything I could in life as quickly as I could." As Staley recalled, "He had to be the class leader, he had to be the best in the band. He had to be the best in his class... and he wanted to be on the top." Robert Levin noted, "Bill would have been president of them all."

The second sphere of personality, the identity sphere, means one's level of consolidated self-esteem and how one regards oneself. What is based on Clinton's ambition and ability is a high level of confidence, even narcissism. Dumas, E. noted that Clinton always had boundless confidence in his ability to forge a consensus and work out any problem. His ambition and confidence were supported by his cognitive intelligence. Clinton was notable for it, and he could deal with the amount of information at the same time. He had excellent academic performance in high school and entered Georgetown University with a Rhodes scholarship. As an undergraduate, he could always "find twenty things to do other than study". At Yale Law Graduate, he "rarely attended" his classes, and studied for his finals "at the last minute", therefore, he was famous for skipping classes and borrowing others' notes a couple of days before the examination but obtained better marks. During the election, he was able to elaborate his policies effortlessly and adapt them to the different groups of his audience. Clinton's 100-character sentence is fully grammatical, and she can stretch the sentence impromptu, which is completely different from George Bush's prose.

When it comes to the third aspect of the personality, the relational sphere refers to one's stance toward interpersonal relations. Seemingly, Clinton is willing to move toward others. He showed the trait earlier when he transferred to Hot Spring High School and blended in with others quickly. Furthermore, he is very good at marketing himself and taking advantage of words to lead the public. Kelly reported, "William Jefferson Blythe Clinton; A Man Who Wants to Be Liked, and Is" in 1992, and "Mr. Clinton, who was always the chief strategist of his campaign, banked on the central faith of his political life: If he could meet enough people, talk to enough people, make the essential connection enough times, he would win." Renson argues that his need for validation is the profound logic behind his extroversion, which is reflected in one's efforts to be acknowledged for the specific ambition, skills, and accomplishments that are central to one's view of oneself. Consequently, he wanted his achievement to be recognized by others, and he always complained that he was criticized unfairly.

Greenstein argues that Clinton had two leadership styles: firstly, "a no-holds-barred style of striving for numerous policy outcomes with little attention to establishing priorities or accommodating to political realities"; secondly, "a more measured, pragmatic style of focusing on a limited number of goals and attending closely to the politics of selling his program." The two styles could be observed in his personality in his previous career, Clinton was ambitious and overconfident and showed the first style when he obtained achievement, but he would transfer to the second style after defeat. During Clinton's first term as governor in Arkansas, he proposed numerous complex initiatives aimed at public school reform and economic stimulation. However, his failure to consider their practicality led to strong resistance. Despite his interest in particular policies, he struggled to streamline his focus, leading to a political consensus that Clinton had an overabundance of initiatives with insufficient consideration of their political feasibility. This resulted in Clinton becoming the youngest ex-governor within two years.

His leadership style is connected with his personality intensely. Clinton always tended to make a big plan because of his ambition. He regarded himself as a reformer, and he believed his intelligence and success in education would help him to achieve. However, his cognitive complexity is attributed to dysfunction. For example, "Clinton never stops thinking"; "He makes a decision when he absolutely has to". It is a so-called "chronic bout of indecision" because his brain clearly perceives subtle differences, continually searching for new information, and putting it into the calculations of decision-making. His need for validation let him listen more from staff. Preston regarded Clinton's

leadership style as a non-centralized navigator. Such a presidential style does not require personal oversight of the policy process, and decision-making is typically decentralized. This approach prefers an informal, non-centralized staff structure to foster policy-making participation among subordinates. Yet, this process further lessens decision-making efficiency. Betsey Wright, Clinton's chief of staff in Arkansas, noted: "What drew me to Bill is his ability to listen, negotiate, and consider other viewpoints, showing his personal security."

## **1.2 Clinton's health care policy**

Clinton's personality and leadership style determined his leadership in the health care policy. Firstly, Clinton had a non-centralized style, but it was too undisciplined to push his policy. When Clinton entered the White House, whether at the informal or formal level, he had no plans to form the White House, and his assistants had little experience working in Washington and were unable to help him control his unorganized tendencies. In late January 1993, Clinton announced the establishment of a health care reform panel, headed by the first lady, Hillary Clinton, and he gave them 100 days to design the policy. Indeed, Clinton believed his wife could do a good job and gave her enough power. However, Mrs. Clinton clashed with the president's economic advisers, but Mr. Clinton did not stand on whether, instead, "he appears to be seeking a middle ground so that he did not have to choose between his wife and his economic advisers." Clinton's indecision influenced the efficiency, and the 100-day plan had to be extended to October.

Apart from the inside dispute, Clinton's style did not unite those who should be united because, like many intelligent and confident people, he is impatient with those who disagree with him and are unlikely to take them seriously. The health care panel excluded Republicans, and Republican lawmakers were not informed in time of the plan. For an already fractious Congress, such moves can only exacerbate the tension. Clinton recalled that the moment at the end of his address in 1994 when he picked up a pen and said, "I will use that pen to veto any bill that doesn't guarantee health insurance for all Americans" was a mistake. He recognized "there was no need to infuriate my opponents in Congress."

Additionally, on the aspect of policy coordination, his unlimited style was repeated in his first term in Arkansas when he designed much too complex proposals but could not narrow policy goals. This policy agenda choice was closely tied to his ambitions. Paul Light argues that the president's choice of policy agenda is little more than a desire for historical standing, reelection, or political prestige. The first one was ambitious Clinton wanted, but the leadership style did not fit in that context. The health care bill, which was presented to Congress in October 1993, was packaged like an airplane's blueprint. The full text is 1,342 pages long, as long as NAFTA, and full of legal language and arcane prose. Republicans charged that Clinton's plan was too big, too complex, too costly, and too much government, and many interests were mobilized to use more than 300 million dollars against the policy. The media propaganda also made the public feel that the reform was terrible, so many people opposed Clinton's reform.

## **2. Case study: Barack Obama's leadership**

### **2.1 Obama's personality**

As for Obama, his character is apparently different from Clinton's. Firstly, although had enough ambition, he did not over-expand it. It is because his ambition experienced a long-time development, unlike Clinton's was inspired by a face-to-face meeting with Kennedy at an early age. Obama lacked ambition in his earlier years. In his book, he recalls that in high school, his mother questioned him in person about his lack of ambition. "I started to tell her how I'd been thinking about maybe not going away for college, how I could stay in Hawaii and take some classes and work part-time". His ambition initially grew from a job at the New York Public Interest Research Group that eventually led Obama straight to a political career. In 1989, Obama said he would "like to run for the U.S. Senate. Possibly even run for president at some point". Furthermore, Obama's ambition took off in Chicago, and he won a series of elections except for the competition with Bobby Rush until he became the president.

Obama has both cognitive and emotional intelligence. He has excellent analytical and critical thinking abilities (Shome, Bhatia, & Shah, 2023). While at Harvard, he was elected editor-in-chief of the Harvard Law Review, one of the nation's most prestigious legal journals. He also wrote "Dreams from my Father", an analysis of race relations in the United States, and has since become a public figure. While teaching at the University of Chicago Law School, Obama's students were inspired by his ability to navigate conflicting viewpoints. According to Greenstein, Obama's cognitive style is characterized by intelligence, rational analysis, and the ability to create complex thoughts. He also concluded that Obama has considerable emotional intelligence and a "first-rate temperament." Mr. Obama is adept

at managing his emotions. Obama himself said, "I don't get too high when things are going well. I don't get too low when things are going badly."

Such a presidential style doesn't require personal oversight of the policy process, and decision-making is typically decentralized. This approach prefers an informal, non-centralized staff structure to foster policy-making participation among subordinates. Yet, this process further lessens decision-making efficiency. Betsey Wright, Clinton's chief of staff in Arkansas, noted: "What drew me to Bill is his ability to listen, negotiate, and consider other viewpoints, showing his personal security." As for his self-esteem, Obama's more depends on his judgment by himself, which is different from Clinton's need for validation as well. He enhances self-esteem at the accomplishment time. Obama had no substantial self-earned success by which to develop further and consolidate his self-esteem and self-confidence before he arrived at Harvard.

Thirdly, Obama shows self-contained but not isolated characteristics in the interpersonal sphere. It means that he can keep a balanced distance toward others. Obama is both sociable and tough, which shows his willingness to contact people. However, he also seems to give others a sense of distance or emotional distance, which shows that his willingness is moderate. For example, his friends at law school recalled that "even those close to him did not always know exactly where he stood" (Harris, 2019).

Obama's leadership style showed his personality. Firstly, the most obvious characteristic of his leadership style is pragmatism. He keeps his eye on the doable, not necessarily the optimal. Pragmatism conforms to his belief in how and why the American experiment succeeded. Apparently, consistent with his success in adapting to new conditions and environments and with his achievements within the political sphere. Obama taught at the University of Chicago School of Law for ten years before running for the United States Senate in 2003. He is one of the most enlightened members of the Senate, and in the current campaign, his voting record is often mentioned, especially by his opponents. However, both the men and women who studied with him in Chicago agree with Eskud's point that Obama is more focused on effectiveness than ideology.

Obama also has a participative leadership style. In fact, as a leader, Obama has developed a reputation as a "hands-off" leader and a very strong delegator who trusts those around him to do what they are supposed to do. He wanted to involve more people in his decision-making, so he often identified and convened policy experts, listened to their debates on issues, raised sharp questions from beginning to end, and solicited opinions and suggestions from everyone in the room, all of which helped him make policy judgments. In the process, Obama could find common ground among various voices. He expressed the point publicly, "One of the dangers in a White House, based on my reading of history, is that you get wrapped up in groupthink, and everybody agrees with everything, and there is no discussion, and there are no dissenting views."

## 2.2 Obama's health care policy

Obama's leadership style enhanced his healthcare policy execution. Upon assuming office, he emphasized health reform's importance and organized a summit with over 120 representatives, including healthcare stakeholders and Congress members. A joint letter from medical interest groups pledged their commitment to making healthcare more affordable and efficient. Obama encouraged bipartisan involvement in the decision-making process. Establishing three basic principles for the healthcare bill, he left the details to lawmakers, sharing the responsibility with six healthcare interest groups. Specifically, he tasked House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid with handling the plan's legislative details, strategically assigning Congress responsibility to circumvent potential obstacles.

Obama's pragmatic style made the health care policy also rhetorical and practical. He named it "affordable" skillfully. 'affordable' was trusted by the public. Although the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act and the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010 are more than 2500 pages, about twice as long as the Clinton's, the law's name, Affordable, which means Affordable, is an antidote to America's rapidly rising health care costs. Apart from that, he states, "It will provide more security and stability to those who have health insurance. It will provide insurance to those who don't. Moreover, it will slow the growth of health care costs for our families, our businesses, and our government." Security and stability are key references based on Obama's pragmatism, which was also concerned for the middle class. In this way, Obama won the public trust and support, and he increased the possibility for Congress to pass the bill.

### 3. Conclusion

This essay evaluated how the distinct personalities of President Clinton and Obama influenced their leadership styles and their impact on their healthcare policies. The value of specific personality traits cannot be objectively ranked as 'better' or 'worse', and their advantages and disadvantages are relative and mutable. For instance, Clinton's high intelligence and confidence fuelled his pre-presidential successes, while also driving his recovery from a challenging first term to a successful second one. Obama, on the other hand, turned potential setbacks related to his identity and race into strategic advantages during his presidency.

Both leaders shared similar traits, like ambition and high intelligence, but these manifested differently in their respective healthcare policies. There is no direct causality between personality and leadership success, as this relationship interacts dynamically with external circumstances. Leadership styles act as a bridge, reflecting presidents' personalities and the influence of the wider environment.

For Obama, his calm demeanor and emotional intelligence helped achieve healthcare reform in his first term. Still, the same traits didn't guarantee success in his second term due to a shift in the political landscape. Clinton's defensive skills garnered more public approval in his second term. The impact of presidential personality on leadership is, therefore, not static but constantly adapting to changing circumstances.

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