

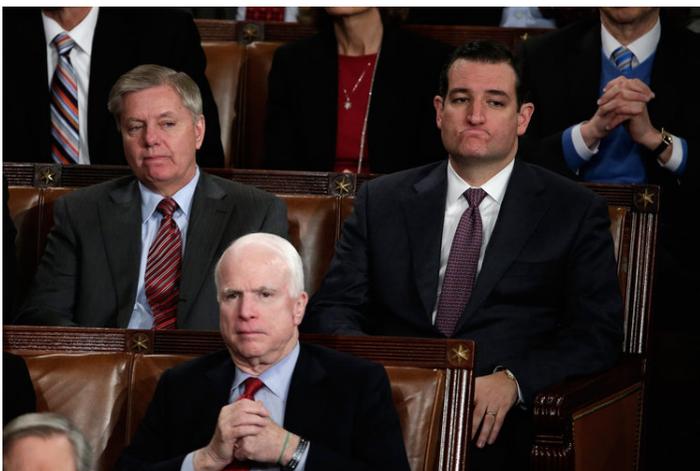
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Why do some politicians cross party lines more? They're nicer

Updated by Andrew Prokop on April 21, 2014, 2:50 p.m. ET  @awprokop

 andrew@vox.com



Senators
Lindsey
Graham,

Win McNamee, Getty Images News

John
McCain,
and Ted
Cruz.

Why do particular politicians work hard to cross party lines? A new [study](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2405140) (http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2405140) by three political scientists suggests that they simply have different personalities — that they're more agreeable. Adam Ramey, Jonathan Klingler, and Gary Hollibaugh Jr. use computer modeling techniques to estimate what personalities politicians have. And they find that personality differences can account for some interesting discrepancies in legislative behavior.

The idea: See if the measured personalities of individual legislators can predict behavior

The most common way to measure personality is to rate people on five major factors — the Big Five. The authors write that these factors, "over the past half-century, have consistently explained nearly all of the variance in personality differences in repeated studies, the results of which have

been quite robust across multiple cultures, contexts, measures, and samples."

These Big Five traits, sometimes referred to by the acronym "OCEAN", are:

- 1 **Openness** (to Experience): Are you creative and intellectually curious, or more conventional?
- 2 **Conscientiousness**: Are you hardworking and organized, or negligent and lazy?
- 3 **Extraversion**: Are you talkative and social, or a quiet introvert?
- 4 **Agreeableness**: Are you warm and cooperative, or rude and harsh?
- 5 **Neuroticism**: Are you temperamental and self-conscious, or calm and comfortable with yourself?

It's most common to measure someone's Big Five personality score with a test (here's [an online version](#) (

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CONSCIENTIOUS
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DID IN
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FEWER
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*MORE
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OF THE
OPPOSING
PARTY*

<http://www.outofservice.com/bigfive/>) you can take). But since members of Congress are unlikely to fill out such surveys, Ramey and his co-authors have to use a different measurement method. In recent experiments, computer models have predicted a subject's personality score based on the words they use — certain words seem to be used more by extroverted people, or more by agreeable people, and so on. So this study applies that computer analysis to all the speeches current legislators gave on the House and Senate floors between 1996 and 2012, and uses that word usage data to rate each politician on personality.

Then, the authors suggest a behavior that a politician scoring highly on each one of the Big Five traits would be likely to demonstrate — for example, they think more agreeable legislators would be more likely to co-sponsor bills with more members of the opposite party, and that less conscientious legislators will be more likely to miss votes.

The study's findings

Does personality predict Congressional behavior?

| Personality trait | Prediction | Result |
|---|--|---|
| Will a more Open legislator... | ...buck party leadership more on key votes? | Only when in the majority party, with unified control of government |
| Will a more Conscientious legislator... | ...miss fewer votes? | Yes |
| Will a more Extroverted legislator... | ...propose more bills? | The effect is strongest for centrists |
| Will a more Agreeable legislator... | ...co-sponsor more bills with members of the opposing party? | Yes |
| Will a more Neurotic legislator... | ...make more mistakes when voting? | The effect is strongest for centrists |

Source: Ramey, Klingler, Holibaugh: "More than a feeling: Does personality predict Congressional behavior?"
 Created with [Datawrapper](#)

For two traits, the authors found particularly strong results — more conscientious legislators did in fact miss fewer votes, and more agreeable legislators do co-sponsor more bills with members of the opposing party.

Then, two other traits seemed to be important mainly for politicians in particularly competitive districts,

A
 POLITICIAN
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or with moderate ideologies. More extroverted centrists proposed more bills, and more neurotic centrists made more mistakes in voting.

The final trait, openness — which the authors interpret as an openness to risk-taking — seemed to predict defiance of the party leadership only in very particular circumstances. When in the majority and with unified control of government, legislators with more open personalities were more willing to go against the leadership of their party.

*ALSO USE
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Limitations of the study

Relying on Congressional speeches might not produce accurate personality estimates

—
few members of Congress write their own speeches, after all. And a politician could use speeches to project a false image of his personality — pretending to be warm and understanding in public, while being cruel and ruthless in private. But Ramey and his co-authors found significant results despite

these data limitations.

It's also noteworthy that two of the traits could mainly predict the behavior of centrist members of Congress. While it's certainly important to understand those swing legislators, this further drives home just how important ideological polarization is to understanding today's Congress.

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[P://WWW.VOX.COM/CARDS/CONGRESSIONAL-FUNCTION/WHAT-IS-POLITICAL-ARIZATION\)](http://www.vox.com/cards/congressional-function/what-is-political-polarization)

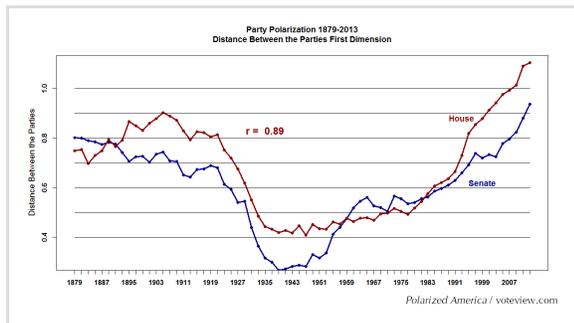
What is political polarization? (http://www.vox.com/card dysfunction/what-is-political-polarization)

Political polarization simply measures overlap between the two parties. A high level of political polarization means that Republicans agree with Republicans and that Democrats agree with Democrats.

There was a time, not so long ago, when this wasn't true — when many elected Republicans agreed more with the Democrats than with other Republicans, and vice versa — and leading political scientists thought it a great crisis for our democracy. In 1950, the American Political Science Association's Committee

on Political Parties released a [report](https://www.apsanet.org/~pop/apsa_report.htm) (https://www.apsanet.org/~pop/apsa_report.htm) calling on the two parties to sharpen their disagreements so that the American people had a clearer choice when casting their ballots.

The political scientists eventually got their wish. According to the polarization measures kept by political scientists Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal, party polarization is higher in today's Congress than at any time since the late 1800s:



Political polarization is sometimes used a synonym for political extremism, which it is not. It is sometimes used as a stand-in for political incivility, which it also is not. The 1960s and 1970s were a time of incredible political controversy and tumult. But political polarization was at a low ebb, because though Vietnam and the civil rights movement and the Great Society split the country, they did not cleanly split the two political parties. The Civil Rights Act of 1965 is a good example: The law was primarily pushed by politicians in the Democratic Party, but many northern

Republicans supported it while southern Democrats were its fiercest opponents.

A close examination of this period also shows why consensus should not be viewed as an unalloyed good. The depolarized political system of the 40s and 50s relied on a bipartisan consensus in favor of segregation. Extremely conservative Southern Democrats remained in the Democratic Party so long as the Democratic Party kept protecting the architecture of southern racism. As soon as that ended, conservative Southern Democrats like Strom Thurmond migrated to the Republican Party, and the system began to polarize.

The problem with party polarization is that the American political system typically requires bipartisan coalitions in order to get big things done, but during periods of intense political polarization, it is almost impossible for those coalitions to form.

[Congressional dysfunction \(http://www.vox.com/cards/congressional-dysfunction/what-is-political-polarization\)](http://www.vox.com/cards/congressional-dysfunction/what-is-political-polarization)

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