

## JOE BIDEN’S POLITICAL PERSONALITY ILLUSTRATED IN HIS POLITICAL DECISIONS

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**Abstract:** The article examines Joe Biden’s political personality. In order to display the features of the president’s character, the author examines his past political decisions. The analysis starts with the description of what political personality is and what it consists of. Second, the author takes a look at some of Joe Biden’s political decisions, which indicate that his certain leadership characteristics that have been seen recently, are actually longstanding because one could also observe them in the past. Finally, based on the conducted examination, the author predicts how Joe Biden might act as a president.

**Keywords:** Joe Biden, leadership, political decision making, political personality, the United States of America.

### WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO CONDUCT A STUDY OF CHARACTER AND POLITICAL DECISION MAKING?

Some people are more likely to become politicians and decide to run for the office than others (Scott, Medeiros 8). Moreover, among those, who decide to start serving in the public service, there are people, who become good leaders, and there are those, who do not. In both cases, their *political personality* plays a key role. It is believed that there is “...empirical evidence to support the relationship between personality and eventual presidential success.” (Krasno, LaPides, 8). The most recent presidency of Donald Trump demands from scholars of political leadership to analyze leaders personality traits, and their impact on the process of decision making. After all, “No president in modern times has adopted a decision-making style less reliant on information and more dependent on instinct.” (Barber, Vi) President Biden’s over fifty years long experience in public service suggests that the president’s political decisions will rely more on knowledge and less on what

George W. Bush called a “gut feeling”, yet, possessing better understanding of Biden’s character, should allow to determine the presidential effectiveness.

Still, as Dean Keith Simonton proclaimed, “...it is not easy to identify the individual traits that contribute to presidential success... because presidential performance can be assessed by more than one criterion, the relevance of a given personality trait depends on the specific criterion examined...[and] situational factors often override individual factors in determining the effectiveness of American presidents” ( Simonton, 928). Moreover, “Decision making is a product of multiple factors. A primary reason for conducting a study of character and politics is to understand how these factors, individually and collectively, affect judgment. What aspects of personality, politics, or the situation at hand seem to have the greatest impact on the decision—how quickly it is made, how strongly it is adhered to, and how others react to it? Was the president’s response predictable?” ( Wayne, 126). To address these and related questions, it is central to, first define political personality, and second to analyze political decisions Joe Biden has made during his public service.

#### WHAT IS POLITICAL PERSONALITY?

Political personality mainly consists of three elements, namely traits, motives, as well as cognition and cognitive constructions. Traits, which include openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and emotional stability are unrelated to motives, which depend on achievement, affiliation and power. Cognitions and cognitive constructions, on the other hand, deal with leader’s beliefs, attitudes and values. David G. Winter, a leading scholar in political personality adds the fourth element, *social context*, arguing that “Our gender, wealth, and position in the social class hierarchy...and our ethnicity, race, religion, nationality and culture, generation, and collective historical memories—all these give scope, meanings, and emotional significance to “stimuli” and create affordances for behavior.” (Winter, 574). In addition to the elements of political personality mentioned above, it can be argued that there appear to be other behavioral characteristics, such as stability, submission, and conciliation, that can be observed in political leaders and that also describe the personality of a leader. After all, following Simonton’s reasoning, the study of political personality "should deal with both cognitive and motivational dispositions, and both personal and social orientations" (Simonton, 678). Either way, one looks at the features that determine leader’s political personality, because even though it might be risky, according to what some studies state, it is possible to predict political behavior based on personality (Winter 575). Studies indicate that personality can be used in predicting presidential success. (Simonton, 105). For example, areas of foreign policy and domestic affairs demand a leader who is flexible. “A flexible leader can interact with prevailing political situations, for example, in foreign affairs by maintaining

the peace through diplomatic relations, and avoiding war, unless absolutely necessary. In domestic affairs, flexibility can facilitate relationships with Congress in negotiating productive outcomes.” (Krasno, LaPides, 8).

In order to verify leaders' character, James David Barber proposes to apply two dimensional personality scheme: active/passive and active/negative, versus passive/ positive, and passive/negative. (Barber, 9).

There is a congruence, a consistency, between being very active and the enjoyment of it, indicating relatively high self-esteem and relative success in relating to the environment...The contradiction here is between relatively intense effort and relatively low emotional reward for that effort. The activity has a compulsive quality, as if the man were trying to make up for something or to escape from anxiety into hard work...Active-negative types pour energy into the political system, but it is an energy distorted from within. (Barber, 9).

In addition, Barber explains the difference between passive/positive, and passive/negative:

...Passive-positive types help soften the harsh edges of politics. But their dependence and the fragility of their hopes and enjoyments make disappointment in politics likely... Passive-negative types are in politics because they think they ought to be. They may be well adapted to certain nonpolitical roles, but they lack the experience and flexibility to perform effectively as political leaders. (Barber, 10).

Accordingly, the questions which call for to be answered are: how much energy does President Biden devotes in his job; is he *flexible* as politician; does he really “enjoy” his presidential life? For example, President Bill Clinton went at his day at the White House like a thunder storm. Regularly, he began with an early jog and finished the work well after midnight. Clinton said: “I loved every day I lived in the White House. I loved going to Camp David. I loved flying on Air Force One, but I never felt entitled to any of it.” (Kennedy). The same can be stated about President Donald Trump, whose work ethics were described as “prodigious” (Renshon, 319). “Trump is a man who, from childhood on has been extremely active and according to the results of his annual presidential medical checkup, ‘he sleeps four to five hours a night’.” (Renshon, 320).

In 2019 Biden was asked by a journalist: “How badly do you want to be president?”, and he answered: “I think it's really, really important that Donald Trump not be re-elected...Could I die happily not having heard ‘Hail to the Chief’ play for me?...Yeah, I could...That's not why I'm running.” (Leibovich). In addition, when questioned: “Would you be doing this if a more conventional Republican (a Mitt Romney or Jeb Bush) were in the White House?”, Biden answered: “Um, I'm not sure, to be quite honest with you...I hadn't planned on running again.” (Leibovich). Biden's unclear responses can suggest the presi-

dent's lack of motivation to do his job. At the end, what matters most is "what motivates a political man" (Nelson, 656). Biden did not show much enthusiasm in 2019 during presidential election, and neither has demonstrated that he "enjoyed" his presidential life since January 2021 when he moved in to the White House. Consequently, in Barber's view, President Biden represents the passive type who "neither works nor plays. As with Calvin Coolidge and Eisenhower, it is duty, not pleasure or zeal, that gets him into" (Nelson, 656). Robert O. Merry also believes that Biden "seems to tilt toward passivity", and adds: "Biden's long Washington service reveals an adroit legislative politician who dealt with issues as they emerged, without much evidence of vision or big thinking." (Merry) On the positive/negative measure, Biden would give the impression to be a positive. For example, the President demonstrated his ability to communicate with various groups, including conservative Republicans over the years of his work in Congress. Biden's cooperation with Republican Jesse Helms who was once chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee when the President served in it, well illustrates Biden's ability to accomplish common goals regardless of what party belongings. Accordingly, it is important to examine closer Biden's foreign policy decisions to find out other aspects of his political character, which indicate the president's positivity or negativity on Barber's scale.

#### WHAT JOE BIDEN'S PAST FOREIGN POLITICAL DECISIONS SAY ABOUT HIS POLITICAL PERSONALITY?

Out of many political decisions that Joe Biden made during his career in public service, which is over fifty years long, some require more attention than others with regards to the examined leader and his personality, because they directly reflect his traits, motives, cognition and cognitive contractions, as well as Winter's "social context". Even though some of Biden's well-known positions on social issues, such as LGBT or abortion, vividly display his views and political philosophy, they do not represent the most valuable materials for the analysis of his leadership philosophy as well as his personal characteristics. The same *cannot* be said about Biden's stand in terms of economic issues or foreign and military policy, as well as decisions, which he made in the office. In the end, when it comes to the analysis of political decision-making and its relevance to a leader's personality, what matters most are the decisions that he/she made, as well as whether or not the leader changed his/her mind on the subject that he/she was considering.

President Barack Obama described Joe Biden, who served as his vice-president, as an aide who often times was against these foreign political decisions for which most members of the presidential team pushed for. Obama valued Biden's way of thinking about various political issues and stated that it was helpful to see a different side of a discussed problem. To illustrate the point, in *A Promised Land*, Obama used the example of Bin Laden raid to explain the benefits of aide's

*flexibility*. Biden as well as Secretary of Defense Bob Gates recommended against a raid. Obama described: "Joe also weighed in against the raid... As had been true in every major decision I'd made as president, I appreciated Joe's willingness to buck the prevailing mood and ask tough questions, often in interest in giving me the space I needed for my own internal deliberations." (Obama, 687). In another fragment, the former president used an Afghan example. Obama recalled the time when he discussed with his advisers deployment of additional troops to the region, and Biden was the only aide against an idea imposed by the generals to send in more US soldiers. Obama wrote: "Among the principals, only Joe Biden voiced his misgivings... 'Listen to me boss, ' he said... one thing I know is when these generals are trying to box in a new president... Don't let them jam you.'" (Obama, 319). Both of the foreign affairs cases demonstrated Biden's ability to think out of the box during a difficult time when important political decisions are being made. However, even thou in Barber's terms, Biden seemed to be *flexible* and avoided conflict (Bin Laden raid) unless completely essential, the president's stand in other political decisions in the field of foreign and military policy which is supposed to be Biden's area of specialty, considering the years, which he spent in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee demonstrated Biden's inconsistency.

For instance, close examination of Biden's policy towards China, which is considered to be the US rival, shows that such qualities as carefulness and sticking to the beliefs that he held in the past and with which he wants to be associated, do not exist due to wrongfully applied *liberal internationalism*, as Van Jackson explains:

As a young senator, Biden was part of the first U.S. delegation to visit Beijing following diplomatic normalization in 1979. After the Cold War, he made the same wager as most of Washington—a liberal internationalist wager—that exploiting the China market and forging economic interdependence would liberalize the Middle Kingdom. As part of that premise, he supported China's accession to the World Trade Organization. And as vice president, he echoed the then-common refrain that "a rising China is a positive, positive development."(Jackson).

Biden's actions not only manifest his liberal internationalism, but more significantly they disclose some very important leadership characteristics, which unfortunately are not a part of 'Joe Biden's portfolio'. Having established that Biden's attitude towards dignitaries, who preside in the Chinese Communist Party, has a long tradition, it can be argued, that "The benefits of embracing China were not merely diplomatic" (Grenell). As studies indicate, Biden's son, Hunter, has a history of investments with Chinese nationals, which started two years after his dad had been elected as a Vice President (Kranish). There are indications, which suggest that Mr. H. Biden is a board member of the Beijing-based BHR Partners investment firm, in which he owns 10 percent (Aredy). However, the most surprising factor is not only Biden's pro-Chinese policies, which he applied, but the fact that once he

received the Democratic nomination, he "... is not only trying to repudiate his own past record on China, he is trying to out-hawk Trump" ( Silver, Devlin, Huang). Suddenly, Biden started to persuade his fellow countrymen that Trump administration's restrictions on China were ineffective, because they were not tough enough. It might be considered to be an example of complete inconsistency as well as imprudence. In addition, Joe Biden's 'new philosophy' towards China is the result of surveys, which indicate that over 70 percent of Americans view China as a competitor and demand restrictions (Silver, Devlin, Huang). Biden's actions with regards to Chinese policies question his competences and the ability to be as tough with China, as he declared. After all, Biden claimed that the United States of America needed to "get tough" (Qingguo, 110) with China. "That said, despite sharing Trump's perspective on China, Biden and his national security advisors advocate a different approach to China" (Tan, 173).

However, continuing the examination of Joe Biden's features of leadership through the lenses of his actions in foreign and military policies, one can argue that one of the most controversial Biden's decisions, such as his *vote for war* in Iraq on October 22 2002, demonstrates his ability to adhere to his views even if they contradict the opinion of others and may negatively impact his political career. After all, "he was one of 77 senators to authorize the use of military force in Iraq. Twenty-three colleagues, some of whom harbored grave doubts about the danger Iraq posed at the time, refused to back the president's request" (Glueck, Kaplan). On the other hand, there are some scholars, who believe that Biden's decision to go to war "reveals core truths about how he has worked for decades: as a Senate dealmaker at heart, with a reverence for bipartisan compromise that his supporters admire — and that critics say has colored his judgment during some of the most consequential moments of his career" (Glueck, Kaplan ). Biden's critics were right because as time passed, he changed his views in the same way as he did in previously examined cases and he became "a vocal opponent of the Bush administration's stewardship of the war, and went on to serve as vice president to Barack Obama, a critic of the conflict" (Glueck, Kaplan). The question is: what does it say about Biden's political personality as well as about his leadership? It is necessary to understand whether his 2002 decision to vote for war means that he is unstable in his views or that, unlike some other political leaders, Biden has the courage to acknowledge that he was wrong.

In order to answer the stated question, one should examine other examples of Biden's stands on war powers. Biden's long history of service in the Senate, allows to analyze some of his positions in a broader perspective, taking into consideration one of the elements, which affects leader's decisions and reveals his/her personality, namely social context. The analysis of Biden's record on war powers indicates that:

Biden has a long record of advocating for congressional war powers and the notion that presidents may not use force without congressional approval. At the same time,

however, Biden also has argued that there are exceptions when the commander in chief may use force without congressional authorization, and has supported some unilateral military actions by presidents, which results in a some-what inconsistent record on this issue (Hendrickson, 208).

Historical evidence shows that in many military actions, which involved the US troops, 'on paper' Biden called for "prior congressional input and approval before a commander in chief may use force" (Hendrickson, 212), while in reality his stands on the use of war powers were mixed. As studies indicate, in 1987, in response to Ronald Reagan's decision to protect Kuwaiti oil tankers by the American forces, Biden proposed the *Use of War Act*, in which he stated that the Commander in Chief had to seek congressional approval in order to use force, except for five scenarios when he/she was not required to do so (Hendrickson, 210). However, the analysis of Biden's stand on war powers during the administrations of Reagan, Clinton and G. W. Bush reveals his inconsistency in that regard. For example, during the Reagan administration, in all three cases, namely Lebanon, El Salvador and Grenada, which required the use of military force, Biden was for the use of power. During the Clinton administration, Biden favored military actions during the Balkan crises and did not actively oppose Clinton when he used force without congressional approval in Bosnia in 1995 as well as in Kosovo in 1999. Even though during G. W. Bush's term:

...Congress did grant President Bush extremely wide authority to use force, which Biden supported, Biden still referenced the constitutional limitations on the president and his opposition to 'extend these authorities', e.g. those proposed by the White House, which is notable given how few others even raised the issue of Congress's constitutional checking role during this crisis (Hendrickson 212).

The analysis of Biden's calls for war powers is full of contradictions and it shows his inconsistency. Even though Biden demanded "checks on 'monarchical' commanders in chief, at the same time, he has also supported unilateral actions by the commander in chief" (Hendrickson 219).

#### WHAT JOE BIDEN'S PAST DOMESTIC POLITICAL DECISIONS SAY ABOUT HIS POLITICAL PERSONALITY?

As a Senator, Biden strongly supported capital punishment during over thirty years in the public service. In 1994 he was the main author of the largest crime bill in the American history, commonly known as the 1994 Crime Bill or the Biden Crime Law, which resulted in the fact that "the number of executions increased from 31 that year, to 56 in 1995, 74 in 1997 and a high of 98 in 1999" (Caldelago). On June 20, 2019 Biden changed his opinion on capital punishment and declared



that he opposed the idea of death penalty. The decision can be explained through the prism of cognition and cognitive contractions, which, being an element of political personality, indicate that Biden's system of values can change. Moreover, the capital punishment case is also related to Winter's social context, since Biden's stand on the issue was arguably the result of his choice to participate in the presidential race. Therefore, it can hardly be a coincidence that a week before the presidential debates, Biden had suddenly decided to, first, announce that his view on an important social and moral issue was opposite to the position that he had been supporting for so long, and second, announce *the plan*, which "supports eliminating the death penalty through legislation at the federal level and incentives at the state level" (Caldelago). Can this also be said about Biden's position on the most important issues in 2020, such as the fight with Covid-19 or about Biden's selection of Kamala Harris as his running mate?

As far as Covid-19 is concerned, Biden is for a healthcare plan that would build upon the Obamacare as well as encourage pharmaceutical firms to negotiate with Medicare over the prices of medication. On his website (<https://joebiden.com/healthcare/#>), one can read: "Instead of starting from scratch and getting rid of private insurance, he [Biden] has a plan to build on the Affordable Care Act by giving Americans more choice, reducing health care costs, and making our health care system less complex to navigate" ([www.joebiden.com/healthcare/#](http://www.joebiden.com/healthcare/#)).

In addition, Biden wants to be the advocate for fairness and he plans to allow Americans import drugs from abroad. It is clearly stated in his program: "To create more competition for U.S. drug corporations, Biden will allow consumers to import prescription drugs from other countries, as long as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has certified that those drugs are safe" ([www.joebiden.com/healthcare/#](http://www.joebiden.com/healthcare/#)). In addition, Biden desires to lower the Medicare eligibility age from sixty-five to sixty and, as opposed to Trump, rejoin the World Health Organization (WHO). After all, he firmly stated: "On my first day as President, I will rejoin the @WHO and restore our leadership on the world stage" (BBC NEWS). Biden's stand on the fight against Covid-19 shows another side of his political personality, the one that discloses his ability to stand firm with centrist approach that is in opposition with the leftist side of his Democratic Party. Biden seems to be not afraid to state his views and, by doing so, he shows his willingness to be open for a new, unknown experience. Moreover, he shows true masculinity by declaring a view that contradicts the position of most of his party colleagues. In addition, his position on healthcare plan, which is crucial to the fight with the disease, displays his empathy and caring for others, as opposed to Trump, who "in his personality and policies, has presented himself as hypermasculine: tough, plain-spoken, the patriarch who is unafraid to offend and unapologetic when he does" (Miller, Gupta). Furthermore, Biden's history of becoming a single father early in his life, as well as the fact that he went through a trauma when he lost his wife and a daughter in a car accident, shows him as a person who is caring, loving, supportive and sacrificing. All of these features certainly describe leader's personality.



By choosing Harris, Biden proved wrong those, who did not believe that he would adhere to his declarations. After all, it was him who promised that he would choose a woman of colour for the position of the Vice President. When that became real, even "...Harris herself called Biden's choice "audacious" and said it could spur advances for women and women of colour that could otherwise have taken decades" (Aljazeera). However, keeping in mind Biden's famous statement: "I'm going to pick someone who is simpatico with me philosophically" (Glueck), one might doubt that by choosing Harris, Biden will get someone who thinks the way he does and shares his beliefs. Having said that, it is important to acknowledge that the choice, which Biden has made, shows that he belongs to a small group of American candidates for Presidents, who are not afraid to choose a running mate, who can be considered a *rival* as well as who also participated in the presidential race.

As history shows, "since 1972, when primaries became the deciding factor in arriving at a presidential nominee..." (Rudi) there were only a few examples when participating nominees "wound up on the same ticket" (Rudin). Probably one of the most famous cases was the situation when in 1980 Ronald Reagan chose George H. W Bush as his running mate, as well as an example from 2005, when rivals John Kerry and John Edwards became running mates in order to become rivals once again, "assembling competing political networks, jostling for attention and staking out ideological turf in preparation for a potential rematch in 2008" (Nagourney). Still, on the other hand, one might say that Biden's decision to pick Harris is not an extraordinary sign of bravery or some kind of well-executed leadership, but rather a simple symbol of political calculation, based on what is more effective for the candidate in his presidential run. After all, having Harris on the ticket gave Biden votes from the community of African Americans. However, taking all factors into consideration, the decision to select Harris can be interpreted of as a sign of his courage. There are many aspects, related to Harris, which clearly indicate that both analyzed politicians will have to make much effort in order to be 'simpatico' for each other.

For example, an argument can be made that the age factor might be a form of concern and an everyday difficulty in case Biden wins the presidential race. It should be considered that "Unlike Barack Obama and George W. Bush, who selected veteran Washington hands as their vice presidents, Mr. Biden, 77, is opting for a time-honored model in which running mates are not just governing partners but political understudies of sorts" (Martin, Herndon). President Donald Trump, being as unpredictable as he is, similarly to Obama and G. W. Bush, selected Mike Pence, who is also a person with considerable experience, as his running mate. Having said that, it seems justifiable to state that the fact that Biden selected a person, who is twenty-something years younger than him, represents Black Americans, has a rather small political experience and, most importantly, is a woman, describes his political personality well, "offers an early look at the nominee's executive style" (Draper) and gives some significant insights on how he might act once elected as a President.

## HOW MIGHT BIDEN ACT AS A PRESIDENT?

The first observation suggests that Biden is a type of a leader who is looking for a close partnership with Harris, similarly to the one that he had with the former President, Barack Obama (Rubin). Eight years of his unique experience of being a Vice President gave him an opportunity to realize how influential the role of arguably the second most powerful person in the world can be. He knows it better than anybody that in a real political life the figure of a Vice President is more valuable to the President “in private than in public” (Levingston, 156). If this is the case, the partnership between the two should be built on solid foundations that represent such values as discretion, mutual respect, professionalism and, most importantly, are in accordance with the current racial situation in the US, namely over-divisibility. Biden wants to send a message to the voters that just as “a black president and a white vice president could lead the nation” (Levingston, 182) from 2009 to 2017, the same can be accomplished with a white president and a black vice president when two of them win the campaign. Biden wants to articulate that the United States, racially divided by Trump, is not something he stands for, lives for and has worked for by dedicating over fifty years of his career to the public service.

The second observation suggests that Biden will cooperate with various groups of politicians and invite to his Cabinet not only people from the Obama administration, but also “including institutionalists who are palatable to centrist Democrats” (Siders). During his presidency, Biden might choose those individuals, who will represent a more ‘consensus like-approach’, which was the trademark of Bill Clinton. In addition, following this way of reasoning, one cannot forget that the current dynamic situation with coronavirus will also impact the choices of Biden. As reports indicate, “Interviews with more than a dozen Democrats familiar with his transition process describe an effort by his campaign to assemble a center-left amalgamation of personnel designed to prioritize speed over ideology in responding to the coronavirus and the resulting economic ruin” (Spiders). If this information is true, then it is reasonable to expect such politicians as Karren Bass or Elisabeth Warren in Biden’s Cabinet, as both of them are specialists in the areas, which need most attention.

The third observation is that Biden showed his *cooperativeness* and the need to bring people together. During the speech in New York in 2019 he said: “Folks, I believe one of the things I’m pretty good at is bringing people together” (Crove). Despite the great value of creating the sense of community and care for each other in light of today’s racial disparity as well as income inequality, Biden’s cooperativeness might also impose certain risks if one imagines him as the future most powerful person in the world. Namely, the 46<sup>th</sup> President of the United States might be “overly open to influence, which could render him unduly vulnerable to manipulation by pressure groups in his own party and impede his leadership effectiveness in negotiations or conflicts with foreign adversaries” (Grebie, Immelman). After all, a leader, who is conciliatory and who exhibits such features as those that were

listed in this analysis, namely *cooperation*, tends to be unstable in his/her views; might take a back seat and prefer to have an impact on issues without taking control and responsibility. It raises a question whether this is a kind of a leader Americans and the rest of the world want to have to address today's threats and challenges. Today, more than before, The United States of America as well as the rest of the world demands a political leader, who not only adheres to his declared beliefs, but more significantly, possesses such kinds of leadership features, which allow him/her to convince others and motivate them to pursue common goals.

**Tytuł:** Osobowość polityczna Joe Bidena zilustrowana w jego decyzjach politycznych

**Streszczenie:** Artykuł analizuje osobowość polityczną Joe Bidena. Aby pokazać cechy charakteru prezydenta, autor analizuje jego dotychczasowe decyzje polityczne. Badanie rozpoczyna się od opisu, czym jest osobowość polityczna i z jakich elementów się składa. Następnie, autor dokonuje analizy niektórych politycznych decyzji Joe Bidena, które wskazują, że jego pewne cechy przywódcze, które zaobserwowano w ostatnim czasie, są w rzeczywistości obecne od dawna, ponieważ można ich było doświadczyć również w przeszłości. Wreszcie na podstawie przeprowadzonych badań autor przewiduje, jak Joe Biden może zachowywać się jako przywódca.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Joe Biden, przywództwo, podejmowanie decyzji politycznych, osobowość polityczna, Stany Zjednoczone Ameryki.

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