Testing Cognitive and Integrative Complexity Theories as Predictors of U.S. Presidents’ Performance: Global Competitiveness Implications

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Cognitive complexity is crucial in executive decision making and problem solving. How complexly a president thinks seems directly relevant to her or his ability to perform successfully. Leadership on an international scale is inherently complex. This study tested a nine personality dimension model of cognitive complexity and found it to be a significant predictor of performance ratings of U.S. Presidents. Condensing the model to five dimensions of personality (Intellectual Brilliance, Achievement Drive, Poise and Polish, Wit and Forcefulness) significantly improved the power of cognitive complexity in predicting Presidential performance. Integrative complexity appears related to cognitive complexity and involves maintaining a high acceptance of uncertainty, ability to synthesize opposing viewpoints, or multidimensional integration of opinions. Although it did correlate significantly with the wit and friendliness of Presidents, it did not predict performance. Apparently Presidents “wear down” cognitively in office and start responding to a Congress and electorate less appreciative of integrative complexity while hungering instead for sound-bites that simplify problems. Continued stress eventually exhausts people, especially executives, resulting in lower integrative complexity. A potential rise in authoritarianism appears increasingly likely. The global competitiveness implications are discussed. It is argued that several of the nine personality dimensions of now validated model of cognitive complexity help U.S. Presidents fight the cognitive strains of office. We found no relationship between cognitive complexity and integrative complexity and we explain why this is. We argue that the tragedy of United States politics is that critically needed strategic thinking declines when cognitive or integrative complexity declines, as it is doing now. This helps explain the gridlock and three year continuous decline in U.S. global competitiveness.

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