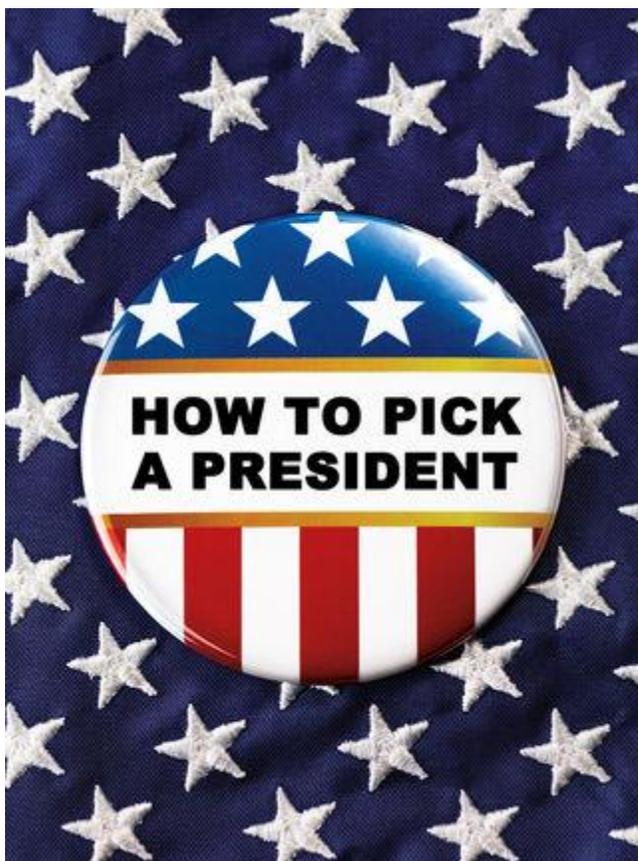


# How to Pick a President

**What we want in a leader and what we need in a leader may be two different things.**

By John D Gartner Ph.D., published on January 5, 2016 - last reviewed on February 8, 2016



The toughest job in the world just got tougher. The United States president today faces increasing pressure and compounding complexity at every turn. Domestic policy demands ever-expanding expertise on topics from the economy to airport security. Proliferating crises around the globe, embroiling state and nonstate entities, require sudden attention and, often, quick response. All in a hyperpartisan atmosphere.

At the same time, historians agree, respect for the office has declined drastically, bringing unprecedented scrutiny. Hard to believe the press once ignored FDR's wheelchair and JFK's affairs. "No past president could function effectively in today's [environment](#)," contends at least one presidential historian. Maybe, another suggests, you need to be slightly deranged to run for the office today.

We need a president to be dominant but not [bullying](#), to be deliberative without

appearing indecisive, to inspire without overpromising, says political scientist Michael Genovese. "It is rocket science."

Exactly what psychological traits will the winner of the 2016 presidential election need to guide America successfully today? I put that question to seven eminent presidential historians, biographers, and political scientists. All agreed that the [trait](#) most integral to governing is judgment.

At the base of the [brain](#), sitting atop the brain stem, is the limbic lobe, the source of our most basic drives and instincts, as well as of our emotions. It hasn't changed much in the last few million years. Responsive to cues that helped our prehuman ancestors survive, it very much influences what appeals to us on a gut level. That is in distinct contrast to the big, new cortex. Sprawling on top of the limbic system, it sets us apart from other creatures, making us rational and human. It enables analysis and judgment.

The old brain is engaged by things that stimulate our passions and fears, the new brain by our need to adapt to reality, ever-changing as it now is. The problem is that appealing to the limbic lobe is how you win elections, while governing the country relies almost unremittingly on resources of the cortex.

We are increasingly of two minds when it comes to politics, one the sum of our past, one the architect of our future. What we want in a president and what we need in a president may be two different things. A president who can "work both sides of the coin is rare," says Genovese, head of the World Policy Institute at Loyola Marymount University.

Candidates differ in the appeals they make to the more rational or the more primitive sides of our psyche, contends psychologist Drew Westin of Emory University, author of *The Political Brain*. "Feelings are millions of years older than the conscious thought processes we call reason." Or as [Freud](#) might have put it, the id is more powerful than the ego.

Our old brain looks much like a chimpanzee's. The rapid rise of Donald Trump is not too difficult to understand if you think of the 10 candidates on the stage for the first Republican debate as chimpanzees struggling for alpha male status. The day after the debate, newspaper columnists almost unanimously declared Trump dead, unsuited for office—a blowhard bully with no grasp of the issues. Viewers, however, saw the proceedings through their limbic lobe;



there was Trump, hooting, beating his chest, throwing dirt at his opponents—bigger, louder, prouder, more aggressive and energized. They thought he won. Even the way Trump styles his hair, making him look taller than his six-foot-three, resembles the behavior of alpha chimps who, as primatologist Frans de Waal reports in *Chimpanzee Politics*, make their hair stand on end to make their bodies look large.

De Waal observes that among both chimps and humans, a more submissive male regulates his vocal tones to match a more dominant male at a pitch that is almost imperceptible to the human ear. In all but one election since the first televised debate, between JFK and Richard Nixon, the man who adjusted his vocal tone lost. The winner was almost always the man who was visibly and audibly more aggressive, confident, and energetic.

So is that how we pick our presidents,



*Planet of the Apes* style?

Along with energy and aggressiveness, many of the traits that underlie presidential success are linked to hypomanic temperament—unsinkable [optimism](#), charisma, [confidence](#), expansive vision, and extraversion. In my study of this temperament among American leaders, *The Hypomanic Edge*, I show that hypomania, which is genetically based and encourages [risk taking](#), is what has made America rich and powerful. People with hypomanic temperament are not mentally ill but have mildly manic features. All their motivating forces are in overdrive, including the competitive push for dominance.

Judgment, the trait most essential to success in governing, is distinctly not associated with

hypomania. Quite the opposite. Poor judgment is one of the most distinctive features of hypomania. Impulsivity, arrogance, a tendency to move and think too fast—all work against the measured, sober, thoughtful, and patient study that good judgment requires. Brain imaging studies show that among people in a manic state, the limbic system is on fire, while the prefrontal cortex, the part of the new brain tasked with inhibiting and modulating it, is hardly working at all. Hypomania doesn't just turn on our drives. It also turns off our judgment, which is why the really bad decisions hypomanics are prone to can seem like a good idea at the time.

Every person alive struggles with balancing the two sides of our nature. How heads of state manage the task is called history. From journalistic accounts and historical records it is possible to see how each of our three most recent presidents—Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama—balanced the psychological traits needed to get into and then be in the Oval Office. They provide a dynamic portrait of what the successful candidate needs in 2016.

## Bill Clinton

No president has ever embodied the id in the public's imagination more than Bill Clinton, thanks to the Monica Lewinsky scandal. In a psychobiographic study I wrote, *In Search of Bill Clinton*, I attributed his hypersexuality to the hypomanic temperament he inherited from his mother (who was also quite promiscuous). All of Clinton's drives are writ large. He spent years battling overeating and can't stop talking. His turbocharged libido propels him to compulsively connect with people in every way, not just sexually, making him an extreme extravert. His "driving need for contact with people, people, and more people," wrote political journalist Joe Klein in *The Natural*, had a "physical" and "carnal quality."

Clinton's extraversion combined with his hypomanic energy made him a naturally great campaigner. When Clinton first ran for Congress, he regularly stumped for 36 hours without [sleeping](#), wearing out his drivers, who had to work in rotating shifts, and the soles of three pairs

of shoes. Though perpetually running late, Clinton would impulsively leap out of the car every time he saw a handful of people on the street: "That's 10 votes!"

High on the list of traits voters value is the feeling that the candidate "cares about people like me." [Empathy](#), augmented by gregariousness, was one of Clinton's greatest political assets. "He's more able to walk a mile in your shoes than anyone I've ever known," says political consultant Paul Begala. When, at a town hall debate, an African-American woman asked, "How has the national debt affected your life?" George Bush senior stumbled for an answer. Clinton left his stool, took three steps towards her, and asked sympathetically, "Tell me how it's affected you again?" Bush was caught staring at his wristwatch and, according to Klein, "the presidential campaign was, in effect, over."

Behind most successful hypomanics, I've found, is a nonmanic partner who disciplines them, manages them, and grounds them in reality. After Clinton's disastrously chaotic first term as governor of Arkansas—he became the youngest ex-governor in history—"Hillary realized she was going to have to step in and develop [discipline](#)," Leon Panetta, later Clinton's White House chief of staff, told me. When Clinton ran to regain the governorship, in 1981, "Hillary became the manager of their joint political [career](#)," wrote political consultant Dick Morris. One of the governor's paramours, Marla Crider, told me she asked Clinton why he loved Hillary. "She challenges me every moment of the day. She makes me a better person. She gets me started, kicks my butt, and makes me do the things I've got to do."

Clinton also has a powerful cortex of his own. His [intelligence](#) stuns everyone who knows him and, as Hillary has said, "he is insatiably curious about everything," a trait that can turn him into a tireless policy wonk. Wonkism, however, doesn't always play well on the national stage. In his book *The Agenda*, journalist Bob Woodward described the 1999 budget battle as "chaos, absolute chaos." Members of Clinton's economic [team](#), however, present a slightly different story. It had "the superficial appearance of chaos," Alan Blinder, a Princeton economist who was on the team, told me. "If one peered into the room, they would see open pizza boxes, wastepaper baskets full of trash, lots of people milling about talking at once."

But Clinton did something that no president has ever done before and none may ever do again. He read every line of the 2,000-page budget and sought open—and, it seemed, endless—debate on every item. "The staff did their best to move Clinton along," wrote Woodward, "but the president resisted, hungering always for more detail." Alice Rivlin, then vice chair of the Federal Reserve, laughed when remembering how faint from [hunger](#) and exhaustion she was. It was, however, "the best [decision-making](#) process I've ever seen in [government](#), and I've been there for a long time," she told me. Clinton was trying to split the economic atom by satisfying both the deficit hawks and the social liberals on his team, whose debate he warmly encouraged. It was a kind of "economic Manhattan project," said Rivlin.

He not only balanced the budget but also produced a surplus while giving a massive tax cut to the working poor and expanding social programs. Under his watch the economy had its greatest peacetime expansion in history. That Clinton got so much bad press for a singular achievement says something about the immaturity of the electorate. Splitting the economic atom is not easy.

We seem to have little tolerance for a process of uncertainty and study, so much messier than glib slogans.

With the notable exception of the Lewinsky debacle, Clinton may have been among the most successful presidents at balancing old-brain and new-brain traits, according to Genovese. "Like Wilson," he says, Clinton had "the force of conviction that people can see as strength, and yet also the ability to step back, pause, think, and re-examine. You need someone like Bill Clinton without the zipper problem."

## George W. Bush

Republican candidate George W. Bush trounced his Democratic opponent Al Gore during the presidential debates in the fall of 2000. He attacked Gore as a [liar](#), "a classic display of aggression aimed at establishing dominance," Westin observes. Gore high-mindedly proclaimed, "we should attack the country's problems, not each other." In the chimpanzee world, failing to respond to an attack with an aggressive response is a de facto act of submission.

In forced-choice studies, when respondents have to weigh one presidential characteristic over another, "strong leader" beats out "shares my values," "has compassion," and "cares about people like me." It's why Americans often elect victorious generals, observes University of Texas historian H. W. Brands. "George Washington, Andrew Jackson, Ulysses Grant, and Dwight Eisenhower were the alpha males of their time. Though they had no political qualifications to speak of, they kept us safe." There are evolutionary reasons to rally behind displays of primal strength. It might help us survive.

America got its alpha male president in 2000, and at first, the bet seemed to pay off. When, months after taking office, Bush stood on the rubble of the World Trade Center with a bullhorn, it was his finest hour, just what the nation needed. Overnight, Bush's approval rating almost doubled, to 90 percent.

Presidents must be visionaries, scholars agree. They must "see over the horizon," says Jay Winik, author of *1944: FDR and the Year That Changed History*. But they also must "take the American people and pull them along, to do things that they may not otherwise want to do," he notes, pointing to the president who pulled America into the New Deal and World War II.

Bush, too, had a vision, about America's need to confront the "Axis of [Evil](#)"—and pulled the country into Iraq. Bush had some of the essential ingredients of a great president at a moment of crisis. But the problem with being a visionary is this: What if your vision is wrong? "You can be absolutely certain and absolutely wrong," argued John Kerry, in his 2004 presidential debate with Bush.

What does it take to be a visionary president? Traits that sit on the hypomanic spectrum. You have to have a touch of grandiosity to believe you are the Moses who will lead America to the Promised Land. FDR was "all ego, all vanity," says Winik, and considered himself the "indispensable man." You also have to be irrationally confident. "Unsinkable optimism" has to be "built into their DNA," adds Rice University historian Douglas Brinkley. "Roosevelt kept



waving, smiling, and just being always in a genial, good mood," despite 12 years of existential threat. No matter what catastrophes happen, no matter how unpopular you might be, "you have to be the Macy's Parade balloon floating above it all." Bush was unfazed by the unpopularity of the Iraq war, says Winik, who became friends with Bush. "He knew history would be the judge, not the papers at the time."

Bush's Achilles heel was his cortex. His overabundance of aggressive energy, combined with deficits in ego-based executive functioning, was probably congenital. In grade school, he was nicknamed "Bushtail" because of his high energy level, an inability to sit still at school, and a tendency toward impulsive actions, which today would "arouse suspicions of hyperactivity," Washington, D.C., psychiatrist Justin Frank wrote in *Bush on the*

*Couch*. That, he says, would explain his short attention span, snap decisions, "lack of interest in abstractions," and "fondness for impulsive action and risk taking."

Bush actively devalues the higher-order, rational processes of decision making. He evinces a disdain for contemplation or deliberation, a retreat from empiricism, and a "bullying impatience with doubters and even friendly questions," journalist Ron Suskind reported in a *New York Times Magazine* profile. Bruce Bartlett, who worked as an adviser for presidents Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, said that Dubya "truly believes he's on a mission from God" and such "absolute [faith](#) overwhelms a need for analysis" or evidence. He "dispenses with people who confront him with inconvenient facts."

Clinton pored over economic data and led marathon budget meetings; Bush had trouble just sitting through an hour-long discussion of the economy. Bush didn't ask a single question and later proclaimed, "I was bored as hell," according to his former Treasury Secretary, Paul O'Neill. "He's plenty smart enough," former Senator Carl Levin told me. "It's his lack of curiosity about complex issues that troubles me." Once, when asked why Bush showed little intellectual curiosity, Bob Woodward replied, "He doesn't like homework. Homework means reading or getting briefed or having a debate." Bush could lead, but he wouldn't read, thereby compromising his judgment.

## Barack Obama

If Bush is more alpha chimp than philosopher king, Obama may be his opposite. Measured and thoughtful, he is a neocortex man to the hilt, Hamlet to Bush's Tarzan. He doesn't beat his chest like Bush, even after the killing of Osama Bin Laden, a moment for chest thumping if ever there was one.

Nor is he hypomanically [extraverted](#) like Clinton. In fact, just the opposite. "More than any president since Jimmy Carter, Obama comes across as an introvert," wrote White House correspondent Peter Baker in a *New York Times Magazine* profile. [Introverts](#) are highly thoughtful and work more slowly, deliberately, and cautiously than extraverts, according to Susan Cain, author of *Quiet: The Power of Introverts*.

But having good judgment is not the same as selling your judgment to the American people. Obama was an inspiring campaigner. Indeed, introverts can be [charismatic](#) public performers in small doses. Obama finds extended contact with people outside his inner circle to be "draining." When it came time to govern, he withdrew into his work. "The figure of inspiration from the 2008 campaign neglected inspiration after his election" and "didn't stay connected to the people who put him in office in the first place," Baker wrote. After Obamacare passed, in the run-up to the congressional elections, he should have been touring the country hugging [grateful](#), newly insured citizens and chanting, "Yes, we did!" Instead, he let the Republicans frame the issue, turning a political asset into a liability that resulted in a midterm election disaster.

Obama acknowledged as much when he told Baker, "We probably spent much more time trying to get the policy right than trying to get the politics right." The Obama fallacy seems to be the belief that good work speaks for itself. In that sense Obama operates "very much the way Jimmy Carter used to try to govern: 'I'm going to do the right thing, and the American people and Congress will follow.' They won't," says Genovese. Part of the job of president is to bring the country along with you, perpetually pitching your vision to the public, the press, even your opponents.

Obama has vision. It was palpable in his campaign. But he didn't drag us over the rainbow with him. "Being led by Barack Obama is like being trumpeted into battle by Miles Davis. He makes you want to sit down and discern," wrote *New York Times* columnist David Brooks. "Obama is very thoughtful, which is a virtue," says Genovese. "But the problem is that it doesn't always play well with the public. If you have the academic or the intellectual desire to look at both sides of an issue, that formulation doesn't work to move the country."

Joseph Ellis, historian of the founding fathers, gives Obama high marks on judgment, an essential trait he believes is in dwindling supply today. "There was a more inherent, deliberative process in the late 18th century," but aiming for [wisdom](#) today is "like trying to slow dance to rock 'n' roll." Obama, America's first black president, is identified with the progressive future, but in many respects Obama the Constitutional scholar is more of an 18th-century man. That sits just fine with Ellis, who believes his "legacy is going to end up being better than a lot of people now believe."



One question Americans face today is whether our primate programming will countenance a female as the alpha male. Clearly, any woman will have to dominate her opponent, as much as any man would, maybe more so. Hillary Clinton will likely be the test case.

The most reliable indicator of true toughness, historians agree, is toughness under pressure.

"[Resilience](#)" was the first trait that John Harris, founding editor of *Politico* and author of *The Survivor: Bill Clinton in the White House*, proffered. Others used terms like "indomitable." In late October, when the congressional Select Committee on Benghazi engaged Hillary in hearings about the 2012 attack on the U.S. diplomatic mission there, the clearest outcome, political observers almost unanimously agreed, was a showcase of her resilience through 11 hours of interrogation.

What launched Hillary's political career in the first place was the mother of all hearings: impeachment. In 1998, Hillary Clinton was the most humiliated woman in America. But she didn't hide in [shame](#). The Republicans resolved to make the midterm election a referendum on impeachment. Thrusting herself into the congressional campaigns, she crisscrossed 27 states, made hundreds of appearances, and refused to stop despite a potentially life-threatening blood clot. Her first-lady approval rating of 42 percent, the lowest in history, jumped to 72 percent. And for the first time since the administration of founding father James Monroe, the president's party gained seats in his sixth year. Impeachment was dead. Hillary's solo political career was born.

In 2016, with political and economic difficulties afflicting populations worldwide and America's well-being inextricably linked to global forces in all their unpredictability, whoever has the strength to win needs, more than ever, the wisdom to govern as well. Much as that makes demands on the candidates, it requires something of voters as well.

The electorate has an obligation to muster its share of wisdom, too. It's our task to choose the president we need, not just the one we want, one who can harness the dynamism of lower-order attributes to the acumen of higher-order skills. We need the maturity to choose a competent adult.

# A Strong Constitution

The traits it takes to run the country

## OLD BRAIN

- **Vigor** Clinton wearing out three pairs of shoes during campaign.
- **Dominance** Bush with bullhorn at Ground Zero.
- **Confidence** Bush saying he is "called" by God to be president.
- **Aggression** Bush dominating Gore in debate.
- **Optimism** Obama's "Hope and change" campaign.
- **Extraversion** Clinton "never met a rope line he didn't want to work."

## NEW BRAIN

- **Curiosity** Clinton reading every line of budget and encouraging debate among staff.
- **Vision** Bush battling "Axis of Evil."
- **Empathy** Clinton: "I feel your pain."
- **Judgment** Bush/Obama financial bailout averting economic crisis.
- **Rationality** Clinton balancing budget.
- **Deliberation** Obama delaying decisions until process of study is completed