

# State of the nation's egotism: On the rise for a century

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Forget the "me" generation. A new analysis of long-term trends in egotism shows there's been a "me" century in America.

The analysis, conducted by researchers at the University of Michigan, shows that characteristics related to self-interest, compared to interest in the lives and needs of other people, was low during the 19th century but rose steadily after the turn of the 20th century.

"We found that self-interest tends to peak after economic booms," said William Chopik, a doctoral candidate in psychology at U-M and first author of the paper just published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*. "In the 20th century, it peaked after World War II and again in the 1970s."

Right after the Great Recession of 2008-09, however, self-interest decreased a bit as judged from the State of the Union addresses delivered by Barack Obama.

"It could be that the challenges facing the country increased the nation's sense of togetherness and focus on the needs of others," Chopik said.

To assess the state of the nation's egotism, Chopik and co-authors Deepti Joshi and Sara Konrath analyzed U.S. presidential State of the Union addresses from 1790 through 2012. They used a text analysis software program called Linguistic and Inquiry Word Count to assess the prevalence of words related to self-interest and other-interest in all

available State of the Union addresses.

Soon after America declared independence from Great Britain, egotism was relatively low in the fledgling nation, at least as reflected in the first-ever State of the Union address, delivered by founding father George Washington.

"The focus seemed to be on the needs of other people, rather than on the needs and desires of the president or people close to him," said Sara Konrath, a social psychologist at the U-M Institute for Social Research,

Purely self-interested words included "I, me, mine." Words such as "mother" that referred to immediate family members were considered moderate in self-interest because they overlapped with the self. Purely other-interested words included "his/her" and words such as "neighbor" that referred to community members. As part of the study, the researchers created a historical self-interest index, the Egocentricity Index, which subtracted the other-interested words from the self-interested ones.

The study is the longest temporal analysis of trends in egocentricity to date, situating the recently documented rise in narcissism (a form of egotism) among American college students within a longer historical context.

"Not only has self-interest been increasing in the past century or so, but there was a surprisingly long period in U.S. history when the nation was relatively high in other-interest," Joshi said.

So why is America becoming a more egocentric society?

"Historical changes are complex, and it is hard to point a finger at one specific cause," Chopik said. "However, with increasing prosperity for

many Americans, there could be more emphasis on 'me, me, me,' with personal needs and desires taking precedence over community needs.

"And there may also be more pressure to succeed over the past couple of centuries. In some ways, we've become a more competitive society, and perhaps what we're seeing in presidential addresses is a reflection of this trend."

But do State of the Union addresses mirror the egocentricity of the electorate or just telegraph the egotism of the Commander in Chief?

"Unfortunately, we have no way of quantifying the [self-interest](#) of the presidents themselves," Chopik said. "But people generally vote for politicians whose traits most resemble their own, and the content of presidential speeches might well reflect what politicians think the people want to hear."

Provided by University of Michigan

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