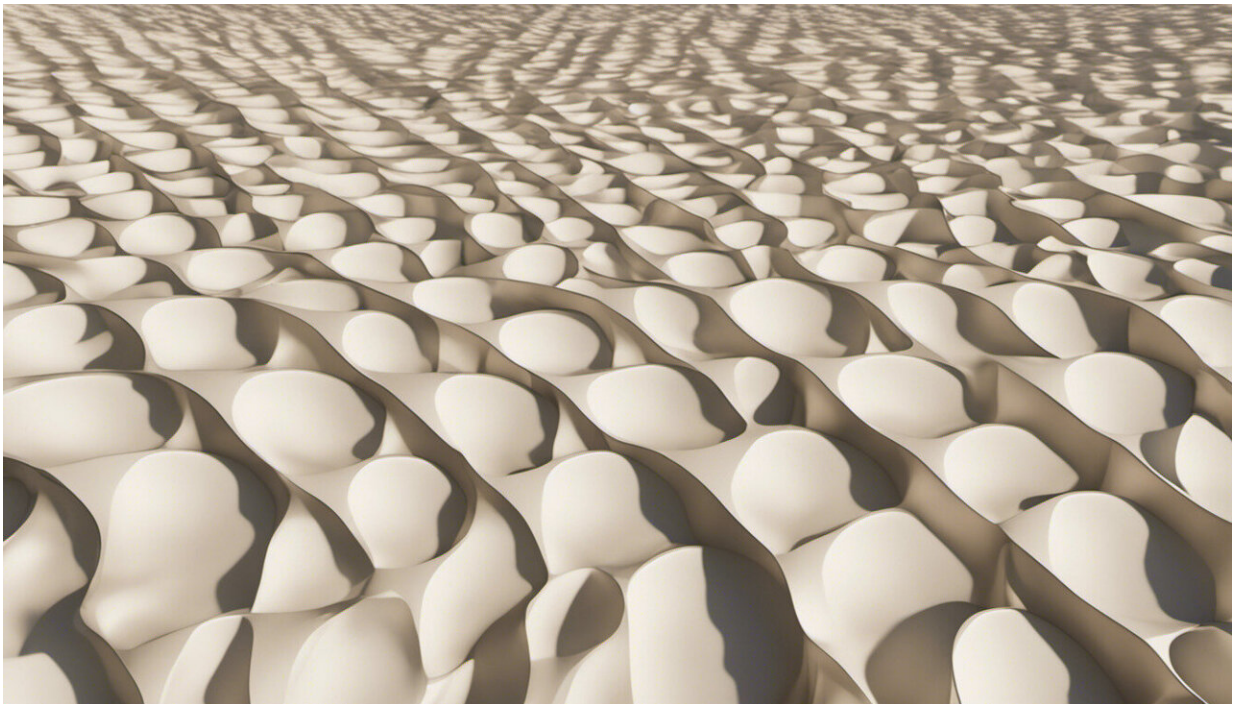


# Study shows virtues, not vices, lead to more effective political leadership

February 17 2016, by Kathleen Maclay

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Do politicians get more done if they are more prone to virtue or to vice, if they are inclined toward justice and humanity or to a self-serving social strategy?

New research from the University of California, Berkeley, shows that

stable virtuous traits enhance the ability to convert power into influence, at least when it comes to the 151 members of the U.S. Senate who served between January 1989 and December 1998.

The study, recently published in the journal *Psychological Science*, concluded that exhibiting virtuous traits was a plus in terms of getting others in Congress to co-sponsor proposed legislation following a senator's ascension to a committee chair role, while the exhibition of vices provided no such boost.

The findings contribute to a long-standing debate about the role of morality and ethics in leadership and support the contentions of Greek philosopher Aristotle over his Italian Renaissance counterpart Niccolò Machiavelli, who argued that the manipulative and emotionally detached are more likely to succeed.

The researchers who produced the paper, "Virtues, Vices and Political Influence in the U.S. Senate," include Leanne ten Brinke, a forensic psychologist and Banting Postdoctoral Fellow at the Haas School and UC Berkeley's psychology department; Sameer Srivastava, an assistant professor in the Haas School of Business's Management of Organizations Group; Dacher Keltner, a UC Berkeley psychology professor and co-director of UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center; and Christopher Liu, an assistant professor of strategy at the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management.

"Senators who exhibited signs of being virtuous became more influential when they were appointed to leadership roles," wrote the collaborators. "In particular, courage, humanity and justice are all necessary when a person acts in the interest of other people and may be especially relevant for the success of politicians."

"We found that virtues amplified influence," said Srivastava, who is

teaching a course at the Haas School of Business this semester on power and politics in organizations. "Vices did not have much impact."

The researchers said their results have important implications for voters.

"Citizens would be wise to consider a candidate's virtue in casting their votes, which might increase the likelihood that elected officials will have genuine concern for their constituents and simultaneously promote cooperation and progress in government," they wrote.

At the same time, the researchers said their work represents U.S. politics in a specific historical era, and that they could not rule out the chance that in other contexts or periods of history more Machiavellian approaches to influence might yield different results.

Among other findings of the team's work:

- There were no significant differences in virtues or vices between Republicans and Democrats.
- It appears that the behavioral traits are stable, reflecting an established social strategy.

The UC Berkeley-led team assessed 141 male and 10 female members of Congress for behavioral signals of vices and or virtues that they displayed on publicly available C-SPAN videos. It took a trained team of Berkeley-Haas undergraduate research assistants close to a year to evaluate the first minute of one video per senator that was randomly selected for coding of verbal and nonverbal behavioral, as outlined below. The coding guidelines were developed by Keltner and ten Brinke, based on standard behavior traits.

Here are some examples of how they measured virtuous behavior:

- The use of humor or eyebrows furrowed in concentration can reflect such characteristics as creativity, curiosity, and open-mindedness—consistent with the virtue of wisdom.
- Speaking in a loud voice with no stammers or eyes narrowed in determination can indicate bravery, honest, and persistence—in line with the virtue of courage.
- Sympathetic tones of voice or facial expressions indicate love, kindness and social intelligence —or the virtue of humanity.
- Expressions of humility such as a slight smile, modest dress or eyes directed downward show characteristics of self-regulation, forgiveness and modesty— or the virtue of temperance.
- The virtue of transcendence and its characteristics of gratitude and hope can be witnessed in expressions of awe.

Meanwhile, here are some examples of how vices were coded:

- A lack of emotional expression, or a smile in response to others pain or failure, which reflect aggressiveness or lack of empathy, is consistent with psychopathy.
- The use of first-person pronouns is tied to grandiosity and a sense of entitlement, or the vice of narcissism.
- A lack of self-conscious emotions or expansive posture can signal manipulation and emotional detachment linked to Machiavellianism.

Researchers said they chose the first minute of each video because those segments tended to be more standardized than other recordings, were generally uninterrupted, and usually began with a formal request to enter their speech into the record, followed by a short description of their legislation or issue.

This information was compared with the senators' abilities to enlist colleagues as collaborative rather than symbolic co-sponsors on

legislation. The latter can be distinguished from the former because such bills tend to include a large proportion of all senators as co-sponsors.

As a next step, Srivastava said that he and Liu will be exploring language use in the U.S. Senate to see what it can reveal about influence dynamics among members. Keltner and ten Brinke are examining virtues and vices among hedge fund managers, who ten Brinke said operate in an arena "where virtue may not be the best strategy."

**More information:** L. ten Brinke et al. Virtues, Vices, and Political Influence in the U.S. Senate, *Psychological Science* (2015). [DOI: 10.1177/0956797615611922](https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797615611922)

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