

Thomas Jefferson Predicted

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Predicting which presidential candidates will be good Presidents is like predicting the weather, and the results are equally unreliable. James David Barber, a well known presidential scholar, has developed a model to attain the elusive goal of political prophesy. He has simplified prediction by condensing the task to the placement of a candidate into one of four personality types. Once candidates are categorized, people can make informed predictions about future performance in the Oval Office. In *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*, Barber identifies areas of concern in the development of personality and relates the importance of these personality issues to presidential performance. The bulk of the book is devoted to applying his principles to Presidents who have held office in the twentieth century. He asserts that these principles can be applied to any president in the past or future. Concerning the past, he patently types the first four Presidents of the United States. About Thomas Jefferson, he states, "Jefferson was clearly active-positive." This paper evaluates Barber's model by analyzing his four personality types and by using his approach to classify Thomas Jefferson based on his life before holding a Presidential office. While promising in concept and simplicity, the types that Barber proposes suffer from inconsistency and imprecision in definition. When carefully applied to Jefferson following Barber's instructions, the model suggests that Jefferson would have been classified as an active-negative prior to being elected President.¹

Barber's main theme is that crucial differences in candidates "can be anticipated by an understanding of a potential President's character." He is aware that such prediction is not easy and that "well-informed observers often have guessed wrong." Even approximate prediction "is going to require some sharp tools and close attention to their use." After his cautionary remarks, Barber proposes four personality types as the tools needed. "The core of the argument (which organizes the structure of the book) is that Presidential character—the basic stance a man takes toward his Presidential experience—comes in four varieties. The most important thing to know about a President or candidate is where he fits among these types, defined according to (a) how active he is and (b) whether or not he gives the impression he enjoys political life." Barber proposes two baseline concepts that he describes by their polarities. The first concept is active/passive, and the second is positive/negative. These baselines comprise the dimensions of a four cell matrix with the cells being the four character types that Barber considers to be crucial. The four types are, active-positive, active-negative, passive-positive, and passive-negative.²

	Positive: Enjoys politics. Happy. Has fun. Sense of satisfaction.	Negative: Dislikes politics. Sad. Is discouraged. No sense of satisfaction.
Active: Does much. Expend much effort and energy in politics.	Initiates much. Enjoys leading. Gets personal energy and satisfaction from leadership.	Initiates much from a sense of duty or obligation. Does not enjoy political life. No sense of accomplishment.
Passive: Does little. Conserves effort and energy in politics.	Initiates little. Fills a position. Gets personal satisfaction from having a position.	Initiates little and holds the current course from a sense of duty. Does not enjoy political life or position.

Figure 1 Barber's baseline definitions combined to define his four types.

Barber delineates four layers in his argument. First, personality is an important shaper of presidential behavior. Second, personality is patterned in understandable psychological terms. Third, personality interacts with the power situation and climate of expectations of a President. Fourth, the best way to predict a President is to see how his personality was formed in early life culminating in his first independent political success. Barber then proposes that five concepts—character, world view, style, power situation, and climate of expectations—permeate the careers of presidential candidates. These layers of arguments and five concepts pose a daunting task for a person who wants to vote for the best candidate, even for presidential scholars who devote their lives to such information. After explaining these issues, Barber briefly defines his baseline concepts of active/passive and positive/negative. Figure 1 provides summary definitions for each element of Barber's dimensions and combines the definitions to show the characteristics associated with each personality type. Barber then specifically discusses the four personality types. Each cell in Figure 2 summarizes Barber's description of the corresponding personality type. His definitions of the baseline dimensions are retained for easy comparison.³

	Positive: (<i>Enjoys politics. Happy. Has fun. Sense of satisfaction.</i>)	Negative: (<i>Dislikes politics. Sad. Is discouraged. No sense of satisfaction.</i>)
Active: (<i>Does much. Expend much effort and energy in politics.</i>)	Active and enjoys it. High self-esteem and success in relating. Values productivity. Developing toward personal goals. Rational. Summary: Want to achieve results. Activity/Enjoyment: Well adapted.	Intense effort with low emotional reward, compulsive. Ambitious, seeking power. Vague self-image. Life is a hard struggle to seize and hold power. Perfectionistic conscience. Summary: Get and keep power. Activity/Enjoyment: Compulsive.
Passive: (<i>Does little. Conserves effort and energy in politics.</i>)	Receptive, compliant, other directed, seeking affection as reward for being agreeable. Contradiction between low self-esteem and superficial optimism. Hopeful attitude but likely to be disappointed in politics. Summary: Seek love. Activity/Enjoyment: Compliant.	Does little in politics and enjoys it less. Why in politics? Character-rooted toward dutiful service to compensate for low self-esteem. Lack experience and flexibility. Tend to withdraw and escape by emphasizing vague principles, especially prohibitions. Summary: Civic duty. Activity/Enjoyment: Withdrawn.

Figure 2 Barber's actual descriptions and operational definitions of his four types.

At first glance, Barber seems to have provided a tool that is adequate for his goal of predicting presidential performance. However, when his argument is closely analyzed, serious flaws appear. A major and foundational flaw, which Barber does not discuss, is the lack of an accepted and coherent theory of personality as part of his model. He does not propose an accepted theory from the fields of psychology or psychiatry in which to frame his discussion. Rather, his discussion reflects a popular understanding about personality development, in short, he engages in "pop psychology." His lack of theoretical framework limits meaningful discussion, implementation, and testing of his model. Since people vary widely in psychological sophistication and belief, without a common theoretical basis, different researchers will reach different conclusions about the effects on character of specific events in candidates' early lives. This one lack in Barber's model is sufficient to limit its utility for a wide range of knowledgeable observers.

Another serious flaw is Barber's inconsistent application of his definitions and descriptions. His baseline dimensions are straight forward and blend into four distinct types that seem clear enough to be useful. However, when he describes the individual types, he is not consistent with his foundational definitions. He quickly moves from activity levels and positive affects to issues of power. He then guides the discussion to a point where self-esteem becomes the single most important issue to consider. In addition to being inconsistent, Barber offers no formal or theoretical basis for his claims and conclusions about personality development that justify his shift to an emphasis on self-esteem. Barber merely asserts that an active-positive personality type in a candidate bodes the most successful presidential performance. In fact, the rest of the book looks at performance in the White House by all personality types and concludes that the active-positive type makes the best president overall. An interesting and pertinent fact

becomes manifest in the summaries of the four types in Figure 2. Three of the types—all but the active-positive type—have problems with self-esteem. Only the active-positive type has no self-esteem problem and, indeed, is described as having high self-esteem. In Barber's operational definitions, self-esteem is the distinguishing feature. According to Barber's discussion, the whole effort at predicting presidential behavior can be centered on one aspect of personality, self-esteem, which simplifies the quest. However, Barber never notes the centrality of self-esteem, and the following analysis of Jefferson adheres to the model as presented.

Barber's argument is that intelligent people and knowledgeable observers can look at candidates' early lives through their first independent political victories to determine personality types. The electorate can make informed decisions about the people they support for president. Thus, the evaluation of Thomas Jefferson will extend from his early life till 1796 when he was elected Vice-President. By that time Jefferson had already had several independent political successes. In 1769 he served six years as a representative in the Virginia House of Burgesses. In 1776 he was elected to the Second Continental Congress. In the same year he began serving in the Virginia House of Delegates till 1779 when he was elected Governor of Virginia. He retired from the governorship in 1781 and was again seated in Congress in 1782. In 1785 he was appointed as minister to France. In 1789 George Washington pressured him to be Secretary of State. Not only can an observer look at early experiences in Jefferson's life, but he also has multiple examples of a mature Jefferson in many offices including executive positions. Barber points out that the most recent political behavior is more pertinent in measuring a candidate than earlier events. Accordingly, the current analysis of Jefferson stresses the two decades of Jefferson's political life prior to presidential victories. Merrill D. Peterson is the ranking Jeffersonian scholar in the world today, and his biography, *Thomas Jefferson & the New Nation: A Biography*, is the recognized, definitive biography of Jefferson in the twentieth century. Consistent with Barber's argument, a reading of Peterson's monumental work should provide all the information necessary to predict Jefferson—especially when Peterson is supplemented and reinforced by other sources.⁴

Jefferson had a rich and full life with many events and expressed attitudes that are important to Barber's model. However, one aspect of Jefferson, his attitude toward political service, shines much brighter than the others. Peterson comments many times about Jefferson's orientation toward public service, and the other writer's, including Jefferson's autobiography, support Peterson. Peterson observes that Jefferson was fussy, serious, reserved in his dealings with people, and very strict with himself. His political life followed a repetitive pattern in which he was drawn into political life from a sense of duty, sought to withdraw, and was again drawn or pressured by others to enter public service. He consistently expressed his reluctance to be in politics and his desire to live a scholarly life at his home, Monticello. This theme of reluctance in politics is so compelling that it bears further exploration.⁵

Peterson characterized Jefferson as begrudgingly fulfilling his duty in his public role. Jefferson attained his first independent political success in ordinary circumstances when he was elected to the House of Burgesses in Virginia in 1769. He gave no real indication at the time of zeal or apathy for public life. Near the end of his six years of service, he provided evidence of his leadership by writing *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* which established his

name as a competent statesman. In 1776 he was elected to the Second Continental Congress where he was appointed to lead in the drafting of the Declaration of Independence which established him as one of the preeminent statesmen in the world. When he was approached with the appointment he said, "Oh! No!," but when he saw that he could not avoid the task, he resolved to do the best that he could. He finished his work in Philadelphia and returned to Virginia. Against his declared will, Virginians re-elected him to another term in Congress. "The desire to be near his family was as strong as the spur of public responsibility." He immediately resigned and returned to Virginia. Jefferson was offered a prestigious appointment as a commissioner to France which he declined saying that the "laboring oar was really at home." After a brief respite at home, he saw the need for political reform and again joined the fray by becoming a member of the new House of Delegates in Virginia.⁶

In 1779 he became Governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia and resigned after two years. Though "honored by the office, Jefferson had no taste for it. . . . He knew that the public's claim on his services could not be rightly denied. . . . 'Public offices are . . . burthens [*sic*] to those appointed to them which it would be wrong to decline, though foreseen to bring with them intense labor and great private loss.'" Jefferson sought to resign before he actually did. John Page wrote to Jefferson that he was the most eminently qualified person for the position. Jefferson "dropped any thought of retiring from office in midstream and grimly resolved to stay on the job until June 1781." People wanted Jefferson to serve in public office, and Jefferson established a pattern of consistently seeking to avoid political positions while often yielding to a sense of duty. Again in 1781, he was offered the position in France, and he declined. Virginians again elected him to Congress without him seeking office, and he declined. The citizens of Albermarle elected him again to the House of Delegates, and he refused to go. James Monroe chided him for refusing, and the Speaker of the House threatened to arrest him if he did not relent and report for service. Jefferson's wife died in 1782, and he suffered through tormenting grief. In 1782 he was offered the French position a third time, and he accepted. Peterson believes, "Jefferson had lost a wife; the country had regained a statesman." Jefferson was in France for a few months and returned.⁷

In 1783 within months of returning home, Jefferson was again seated in Congress. In 1784 he was offered the position in France a fourth time. Finally, he truly accepted the duty. He went to France where he lived and served the United States till 1789. Unknown to Jefferson, Congress approved his appointment as Secretary of State on the same day that he left Paris to return to America. As soon as Jefferson arrived, he received a letter from George Washington asking him to be Secretary of State. In Jefferson's own words, "I received it with real regret. . . . I then meant to return home, to withdraw from Political life." After initially declining and receiving further correspondence from Washington, Jefferson replied that, "If . . . I could be more useful in the administration of the government, I would sacrifice my own inclinations." He had previously stated his aversion to any post, and, after reluctantly accepting Washington's offer, he retained the conviction that he had been overpowered to bow down to the will of the people. He tried to resign twice as Secretary of State, but it was December, 1793, before he was actually able to leave office and go home, which he had wanted to do for so long. But he was not allowed to stay retired for long before people propelled him into a presidential election in 1796.⁸

"Jefferson became a candidate for the presidency in 1796 in spite of himself. He did not seek the office but the office sought him. he did not consent to run or, if elected, to serve; and lest he refuse, He was not even asked. . . . he found himself back on the field of combat in a contest for the nation's highest office. It had all been against his will. . . . his candidacy was a *fait accompli* before he had knowledge of it. . . . There was no escape." Before he was installed as Vice-President he said, "I have no ambition to govern men. It is a painful and thankless task." The campaign for president in 1796 ends the current analysis which is designed to exercise Barber's model in predicting a presidential candidate. Barber says that Jefferson was an active-positive President, but this analysis concludes differently. Perhaps Barber was looking at Jefferson as he actually performed in the White House. As a Presidential office holder from 1796 to 1808, Jefferson does seem to have been a different man. "The alacrity with which he stepped into this new role has never ceased to amaze students of his character. The change from the retired master of Monticello to the downright politician, all in a few months' time, was a remarkable instance of Jefferson's adaptability." But Barber's argument is for the utility of his model in predicting presidential performance of candidates—not classifying behavior of past Presidents.⁹

If a political observer in the presidential campaign of 1796 had been asked to classify Jefferson according to Barber's four types, based on the information available at that time, he would have classed Thomas Jefferson as an active-negative type. Jefferson's activist tendencies have never been seriously questioned. This analysis agrees with Barber on the active/passive dimension. However, on the positive/negative affect dimension, Jefferson clearly falls on the negative side as defined and described by Barber. Several perspectives on Jefferson attest to his negative affect for politics. First, not only did Jefferson not get emotional satisfactions and rewards from political life, but he said that public service was onerous and draining to him. His behavior was consistent with his claims. He repeatedly declined positions to which he was elected and appointed. He even refused, under threat of imprisonment, to fulfill a position to which he was elected against his will. He openly declared his aversions to such positions and told people in advance that he did not want them. Jefferson simply did not give the impression that he enjoyed political life which is Barber's basic definition for a negative affect. Second, Jefferson held to principles of republican government and served in public office out of a sense of duty. The people around Jefferson apparently recognized his dislike for public service and his sense of civic duty. Without Jefferson's knowledge and against his will, they often thrust him into public service and counted on his sense of duty to compel him to serve. The presidential campaign of 1796—the campaign in which observers would have first used Barber's model—is the quintessential example of the tactics of people who wanted Jefferson in office. Third, Jefferson had a perfectionistic conscience and was very harsh with himself. His harsh self-evaluations often robbed him of enjoyment from impressive political triumphs. These aspects of Jefferson's character clearly place Jefferson on the negative side of Barber's affect dimension. According to Barber's definitions of the two baseline dimensions, Jefferson obviously fits in the active-negative type. According to Barber's operational descriptions of the four types, Jefferson is definitely on the negative side but tends to fill Barber's descriptions for both negative types. Since Jefferson was an activist with a negative affect in politics, the active-negative type is the most appropriate type for Jefferson.¹⁰

Barber makes a strong point that the active-negative type is the most potentially dangerous and least desirable of the four types. An observer following Barber's scheme would not have voted for Thomas Jefferson in 1796. The issue of self-esteem needs to be considered. As previously noted, Barber's model suggests that self-esteem is the distinguishing characteristic and that a candidate with high self-esteem is the most favorable. Jefferson undoubtedly had high self-esteem. He was one of the most prolific writers in American history and believed that he could change the course of American history through his writings. He openly contended with philosophers, scientists, and naturalists around the world. Jefferson was not shy in challenging renowned experts in their own fields and expended much energy in proving his points. Jefferson considered his election as President in 1800 to be a revolution as important in American history as the Revolution of 1776. He believed the election saved the American republic. No one questions Jefferson's self-esteem and assurance. These qualities led people to continually put him into positions of leadership, even against his will. Based on self-esteem, a knowledgeable voter in 1796 would have voted for Thomas Jefferson.¹¹

In the case of Thomas Jefferson, Barber's model does not prove to be productive. Barber has devoted much time to presidential studies, and it is likely that he can make informed predictions. However, his model needs to be clarified and refined before it can be consistently used by a larger circle of knowledgeable presidential observers.

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EndNotes

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