

MURAJ In-Focus: Brenda Ellis, Industrial-Organizational Psychology

By Austin Kraft

Ever since she was an undergraduate student in psychology, Brenda Ellis has wanted to understand what makes people tick. Now a doctoral candidate at the University of Minnesota, Brenda specializes in industrial-organizational (I/O) psychology, which is the study of people at work. I/O psychology does not only consider the stereotypical 9-to-5 corporate job; its domain of inquiry extends to students at school, politicians in office, and more. Since 2015, Brenda has analyzed personality traits and their power to predict counterproductive behavior among politicians. As she nears the end of her doctoral program, she met up with the team at the Minnesota Undergraduate Research & Academic Journal (MURAJ) to talk about her research and to share the insight that she has gained in pursuing the question, “What makes people tick?”

Running for office is not easy; being in office is no simple feat, either. Evidence shows that leadership generalizes across activities, so a leader in one setting is likely to be a leader in another. “I was curious about why anyone would run for office,” Brenda explains. “Are certain traits associated with [politicians] doing bad behavior?” To investigate the correlation between political misbehavior and personality traits, Brenda needed to gather two kinds of data: politicians’ behavioral track-records and their personalities. To find such misbehavior in action, she scoured the internet for reports, crediting websites like govtrack.us with providing information on misconduct of members of the U.S. Congress.

When it comes to rating personality, “the best way to do [it] is to give [people] a questionnaire,” Brenda mentions. However, she

acknowledges the impracticality of asking politicians to fill out questionnaires on their own personality. Seeking out ex-Congressional staffers for input on their bosses’ personalities was challenging; in particular, Brenda had difficulty in getting the necessary contact information. Citing the general validity of strangers’ ratings of personality, Brenda evaluated politicians’ personalities based on the questionnaire responses of strangers through online survey tools like Qualtrics and Amazon Mechanical Turk. She constructed questionnaires to measure counterproductive behavior, focusing on broad dimensions of political misbehavior such as instances of nepotism, misuse of resources, and abuse of power. Text analysis also enriched her growing database, as word frequencies and sentiment expressed in speeches can be evidence of

certain traits.

In the questionnaire study, every participant watched one five-minute video clip of a given politician giving a floor speech or interview. Prior to participant viewing, Brenda edited out party references and hot-button issues to limit biases, as the goal of the study is to evaluate personality, not stances on specific policies. The assembly of the video clips involved serious digging; “some people have a lot more out there than others,” Brenda comments. Following the five minutes of video footage, a participant was asked approximately one hundred questions, some pertaining to that politician’s personality and others related to the participant themselves, such as the participant’s gender, political orientation, and level of cynicism toward politicians. This second group of questions, Brenda says, gets at the bigger picture. “What led them to rate the politicians in the way that they did?” she asks, concerned with controlling the variances and biases in the personality ratings assigned by participants to the politicians. I/O psychology tends toward rigorous measurement, which leads to quantifying things that do not naturally lend themselves to quantification. “[Psychology is] often called the soft science, but studying people is very, very hard. There’s nothing soft about it.”

Not one to shy away from a research challenge, Brenda has long been eager to advance our understanding of human behavior. “Starting as an undergrad, I thought that we know more than we know; why don’t we know more?” As Brenda concluded her undergraduate degree in psychology at Indiana University, she decided to conduct her own study, collaborating with a faculty mentor. Brenda was drawn to I/O psychology because it is a practical and applicable area of psychology, with

far-reaching implications. Psychology itself is a massive field, and Brenda reflects on the consequences of its breadth: “If a concept or construct is valid, then it can be useful across clinical, social, and I/O psychology... as well as developmental psychology, political psychology, cognitive psychology, etc.” On the other hand, academic silos can develop in a discipline as large as psychology. Restricting oneself to a silo, Brenda mentions, is not conducive to scientific progress. At the intersection of psychology and political science, her work is yielding novel ways of thinking about how we judge our elected officials and judge who is fit for office.

Past research has found drastic personality differences among voters across party lines. Relative to these findings, Brenda’s research indicates that politicians generally possess less drastic personality differences by party. Previous work has suggested that participants identifying as Democrats scored higher on compassion than Republican-identifying participants, and the Republican-identifying participants scored higher on contentment than their Democrat-identifying counterparts. As for the participants’ ratings of politicians’ personalities in Brenda’s research, women politicians scored higher in neuroticism than men politicians. Brenda brings up the influence of gender norms and expectations: “Assertiveness in females may be perceived as more strident or emotional than in men.” As Brenda wraps up the study, she prepares to present the findings at an I/O conference later this spring.

Brenda’s work is part of a larger research program on counterproductive behavior. Two other students in her doctoral cohort have supported Brenda’s projects with statistical

analyses and data-gathering. Several semesters ago, a team of eight psychology undergraduates helped with transcribing political speeches for text analysis. Currently, Brenda works with two undergraduate research assistants, who have been invaluable and dependable in this stage of the research.

The best favor that undergraduates can do for themselves, Brenda recommends, is to develop a strong background in statistics. Second, reading is key. “If there’s an area that you’re interested in, read about it,” she advises. Lastly, Brenda suggests to students that they reach out to graduate students who are working on topics of interest to them. For Brenda, the topic is I/O psychology: the study of everyday work in all of its diverse forms, including counterproductivity among members of the U.S. Congress.

“A lot of us don’t spend time really getting to know our politicians,” Brenda mentions at the end of the conversation. “Most of us are making our judgments very fast.” She and her collaborators are deconstructing these rapid decisions and looking into what they say about politicians as well as the individuals judging them.

This profile is a part of the series MURAJ In-Focus, organized by the Minnesota Undergraduate Academic & Research Journal, with funding from the University of Minnesota Office of Undergraduate Education.