

Virtue, Vice, and the U.S. Senate

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NPR:

To Aristotle, the ideal politician was a person of high virtue, one of the best and most capable members of society. Though Machiavelli also used the word “virtue” to describe his own ideal, he obviously meant something different, more akin to a paranoid, power-hungry psychopath. The contrast leads to an obvious question: Which of these two has more influence in the United States Senate? Good news: While the more Machiavellian may have power early in their careers, according to a new study, it’s the courageous and wise senators who have the most influence as they move up the ranks.

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To find out, Leanne ten Brinke, a postdoctoral fellow at the University of California–Berkeley’s Haas School of Business, and colleagues from Berkeley and the University of Toronto collected 502 C-SPAN clips of a total of 151 senators speaking on the Senate floor between 1989 and 1998. Assistants watched each of those clips—one per Congress for each senator—for signs of virtues such as courage and humility, and vices like schadenfreude, emotional detachment, or a lack of empathy for others. The researchers measured influence with the average number of people a senator enlisted to be co-sponsors on bills he or she originated, and also took note of when senators assumed Senate committee leadership positions.

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