

Why ruthlessness is a net negative in politics

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What's the right way to exert political influence? Is it more effective to be selfless and virtuous, or forceful and ruthless? Recent research we've conducted of the behavior of US senators reveals something surprising: Being a virtuous leader actually carries its own rewards.

We conducted a study of the leadership attributes of US senators across several decades of floor speeches. We were looking for visual cues about their leadership styles. Do they demonstrate compassion and empathy? Or do they demonstrate manipulation and ruthlessness? Given the current polarized political climate, one might think that to get anything done, politicians *need* to be ruthless and forceful.

That is the question we sought an answer to in a [paper](#) recently published in *Psychological Science*. Our approach to the question was based on [decades-long research](#) that suggests that [personality traits manifest in verbal and nonverbal behaviors](#) in the face, the body, in tones of voice, and the use of specific words.