

Following the Leader? The Role of Personality in Circuit Court Compliance with Supreme Court Decisions

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Abstract

Previous studies have shown that personality impacts decision-making at the Supreme Court but have yet to test theories of personality on circuit court judges. Using a novel dataset of over 56,000 pre-confirmation texts – speeches, judicial opinions, academic articles – for 200 circuit court judges confirmed since 1987, I generate the first personality trait estimates for individual U.S. circuit court judges. Using these estimates, I test the role of personality on circuit judge decision making. Specifically, I look at how conscientiousness influences a judge’s adherence to Supreme Court precedent. I find that judges high in conscientiousness are more likely to follow Supreme Court precedent while those low in conscientiousness are more likely to stray. These findings have dramatic consequences regarding the role of circuit court judges and implications for the judicial hierarchy.