

# No more Mr nice guy? A leadership trait analysis of UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer

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## Abstract

While we know the personality traits of leaders matter in politics, political analysis often struggles to capture such traits beyond qualitative and ad hoc evaluations of character, often resulting in disjuncture between assessment and behaviour. This is evident in the contrast between UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer's reputation as a risk-averse and detail-oriented technocrat and the record of his first year, which suggests a tougher, more decisive and more uncompromising persona. This article explains this discrepancy by presenting a comprehensive Leadership Trait Analysis of Starmer, using automated content analysis of spontaneous speech during his premiership. Our findings show Starmer exhibits higher than average positions on his belief in his ability to control events, distrust towards others, need for power, and self-confidence, a profile associated with leaders who challenge constraints, eschew compromise, and personalise decision-making.

## Keywords

Keir Starmer, leader psychology, leadership trait analysis, personality, United Kingdom

## Introduction

How leaders' personality traits shape their actions has become an increasingly important question in international politics. Individual psychology matters because it shapes how political leaders interpret the world, weigh options, and make decisions, often in ways that broader structural factors, such as institutions or international pressures, cannot fully predict. As outcomes increasingly turn on individual agency, understanding leaders' personalities becomes essential to grasp the dynamics of decision-making. Leaders do not simply react to their environments; they actively shape them, and in moments of crisis or ambiguity, these personal differences can prove decisive. And yet, while it is intuitively clear that leaders matter, political analysis has often fallen short in adequately accounting for the role of leaders. While analysts often invoke leader psychology, such references are

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frequently vague or reductive, used as a catch-all for behaviour that defies conventional logic, without engaging with the field's methodological rigour or theoretical foundations (Thiers, 2025). This lack of analytical depth can lead to flawed interpretations that weaken our understanding of decision-making within government. Moreover, leaders are often treated by analysts as cyphers for underlying socio-political dynamics (e.g. parties, factions, constituencies) in a way that reduces their agency as individuals and underplays their ability to interpret and shape the broader forces to which they are subject.

This study examines the leadership traits of Keir Starmer, the Labour Prime Minister in the United Kingdom since July 2024. Starmer offers an instructive case of a leader whose actions have not only had important repercussions for foreign and domestic policy but are also poorly captured by existing depictions of his personality. Starmer is often depicted by observers as a cautious, technocratic, and detail-oriented individual (e.g. Baldwin, 2024: xi; Fielding, 2021; Goes, 2021; Pike, 2024a). Yet his first year in office has been associated with an ostensibly uncharacteristic decisiveness and with a less cautious approach to major issues than might have been expected. At home, Starmer has surprised observers with the severity of his welfare cuts, along with his reluctance to back down from unpopular commitments and his steadfastness in the face of criticism. Internationally, Starmer has rapidly taken on the role of a confident statesperson, articulating bold policies on Europe and Ukraine and engaging in high-profile diplomacy with other world leaders, including Donald Trump. This disjuncture between depictions of Starmer's personality and his actions raises important questions about how well we truly understand the leadership traits of the UK Prime Minister.

In this paper, we employ Leadership Trait Analysis (LTA) to offer a first systematic assessment of Starmer's leadership traits and how they compare with other UK leaders. LTA offers an at-a-distance assessment of leader personality using an automated content analysis method based on frequency counts which assesses leaders across specific traits: (1) the ability to control external events, (2) need for power, (3) conceptual complexity, (4) relationship orientation, (5) task orientation, (6) in-group bias, and (7) distrust. Combinations of these traits are used to infer specific characteristics and likely behaviours. We use unprompted verbal material from 22 May to 2 July 2024 and from 4 July 2024 to 24 March 2025 to capture off-the-cuff (and thus unscripted) utterances made both during and after Starmer's ascent to the premiership. The analysis allows for a more systematic assessment of personality traits, which benefits from the generalisability of the individual dimensions, since these can be compared across cases and linked to existing theoretical expectations. Our findings show that Starmer's personality in office diverges substantially from the average of UK leaders in four of the seven traits analysed. Specifically, in office, he exhibits a high belief in the ability to control events, high distrust towards others, high self-confidence, and a high need for power. With the exception of self-confidence, on which he is average in opposition, these scores are similarly high during the Labour leader's period in opposition. The attributes of Starmer's personality speak to the profile of a leader who seeks to challenge constraints, enacts tough and hawkish policy decisions, makes decisions quickly, avoids compromise and conciliation, and favours personalised decision-making and person-to-person negotiation.

Our research makes four distinct contributions. First, we employ established tools from political psychology to enhance understanding of decision-making processes in the United Kingdom by focusing on a central figure: the Prime Minister. In doing so, we aim to shed new light on the surprising toughness displayed by Keir Starmer in office, despite his reputation as a consensual technocrat. Second, we place Starmer's leadership in a

broader context by comparing him directly with previous UK Prime Ministers, while also providing for further comparative analysis by depicting Starmer on generalisable dimensions of leadership traits. Third, by examining scores from Starmer's time in both opposition and in power, our research can help us to understand how leaders' personality traits interact with changes in their political circumstances – in this instance, showing how the assumption of power coincided with an increase in self-confidence. Fourth, our research offers broad – but important – expectations of Starmer's future responses to decisions and crises by distilling aspects of his personality which are associated with specific actions in a manner that can help us understand future trajectories of UK policymaking under Starmer.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we set out why leader psychology matters for understanding their behaviour, contextualising this mode of analysis within the discipline and showing the contribution personality traits can make relative to structural explanations for policymaking. Second, we examine assessments of Starmer's personality in the existing literature, identifying the traits most associated with the Labour leader and reflecting on the need for a more systematic approach that can avoid the pitfalls of existing assessments. Third, we introduce the LTA methodology, which underpins our research, setting out the core assumptions of at-a-distance approaches to studying leader psychology and the core elements of how we operationalise the methodology for our study. Fourth, we analyse the results from our LTA on the basis of the seven dimensions informing LTA research. Finally, we discuss the implications of our analysis for assessments of Starmer's governing style and illustrate our argument with brief empirical analyses of Starmer's record at home and on the world stage.

## **Why leader psychology matters**

Why does personality matter, and why should we study it? The term personality refers to a systematic pattern of functioning that remains consistent across a range of behaviours and over time. Understanding the personalities of leaders provides insight into their behavioural tendencies, since decisions made by a specific individual are highly likely to bear the imprimatur of that person's personality. Bringing in personality as an analytical tool can therefore help us understand why individuals approach similar situations in different ways. For instance, it is difficult to interpret major historical events of the twentieth century solely as outcomes of structural or political forces without acknowledging the pivotal influence of prominent individual leaders such as Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Josef Stalin, Adolf Hitler, and Mao Zedong (Post, 2003). Moreover, possessing knowledge of a leader's personality enables relatively accurate predictions of how they are likely to act in specific situations, even before those scenarios unfold. Because leader personality is a stable factor that is often resilient to change in the short-term, it can provide a good basis from which to assess the future actions of leaders. It can prove especially helpful where other determinants of behaviour are lacking, notably decisions where there is no ready analogue or where structural pressures are weaker or point in different directions.

Furthermore, there are situations in which examining a leader's personality becomes especially salient. These include instances of ambiguity or instability, non-routine decision-making environments, or periods of crisis where individual agency can come to matter more (Holsti, 1976; Hudson, 2013). In such conditions, structural explanations may fall short, and individual-level analyses may offer more explanatory power. Leaders'

personalities can also come to shape outcomes more readily in contexts where various forms of political, economic, strategic, and normative constraints are lower. These can include polities where leaders are more empowered vis-à-vis domestic veto players (Tsebelis, 1995), specific policy areas which are subject to greater levels of executive discretion (Kaarbo, 2018), more powerful states or those in pivotal positions in the international system (e.g. Katzenstein, 1985), or decision-moments where multiple viable policy alternatives are on the table (McKibben, 2020). These conditions are often held to apply in the UK context, given the strategic and economic heft of the United Kingdom and its status as a 'residual great power' (McCourt, 2014), the extensive powers vested in the Prime Minister by the UK constitution (especially where they possess a workable majority) (Tsebelis, 1995), and the extent of the government's prerogative powers in foreign policy (Kaarbo, 2018).

Traditional approaches within Political Science and International Relations (IR) have often downplayed the role of leader behaviour, seeing such explanations (incorrectly, we argue) as ad hoc and seeking instead to reduce outcomes to the interplay of structural factors, societal and international forces, and institutional channels. Yet research in Political Psychology has increasingly filtered into the mainstream of both disciplines in recent years, leading to rising interest in leader personality within both Political Science and IR. The result has been an increase in works from an agent-centred perspective, which have highlighted the numerous ways in which leader personality shapes policymaking. For example, research has shown how decision makers' personal characteristics have shaped policy outcomes (Thiers and Wehner, 2023), why certain leaders are more susceptible to policy failures (Brummer, 2016), how individual predispositions influence the adoption of hawkish or dovish policy orientations (Kesgin, 2020), and why some leaders are more inclined to operate within established boundaries, while others may challenge these limitations and seek to alter the status quo (Dyson, 2007). Existing studies have also demonstrated the role of leaders' beliefs in shaping perceptions of power on the global stage, and how these influence the decision to escalate conflicts, pursue cooperation, or engage in terrorism (Lazarevska et al., 2006; Malici, 2006, 2011; Malici and Malici, 2005; Schafer and Walker, 2006; Walker, 2013).

## **Leader personality and structural factors**

Research on leader personality does not abandon structural factors but rather insists that actions in both domestic and external spheres of policymaking are rooted in the decisions made by human actors, both individually and collectively (Hudson, 2013). Leaders with different personality traits will respond to identical contextual constraints in different ways, resulting in divergent policy choices. These differences across individuals, despite similar external conditions, are precisely what personality-based approaches seek to explain. While structural factors may determine the broad contours within which viable decisions take place, they cannot afford the necessary specificity to explain why individuals would make specific choices among these multifarious possibilities (e.g. Hudson, 2005; Snyder, 1996). Moreover, these individual decisions can lead to highly divergent outcomes, even as they respond to similar structural constraints. For example, when confronted with external threats, states may choose highly divergent strategies (e.g. bandwagoning or balancing) or highly divergent alliance choices, all in response to common external pressures (Walt, 1990). Furthermore, personality can shape how structural constraints are interpreted in the first place, meaning personality traits not only shape

*responses* to ostensibly exogenous structural pressures, but that the efficacy of these pressures themselves is partially endogenous to how individuals construct them (e.g. whether or not a given action constitutes a ‘threat’).

While personality is recognised as a relatively stable aspect of human psychology, contemporary research suggests that individuals engage with their environments in idiosyncratic ways, and these environments can activate different facets of their personality (see Caspi et al., 2005; Mischel and Shoda, 1995). In other words, when confronted with different roles or critical events, leaders may display changes in their traits, but these shifts are not uniform across individuals; rather, they occur in ways consistent with each leader’s underlying personality. For example, a leader with a strong need for power might be more inclined to act strategically, adjusting their behaviour as they move from campaigning to governing, perhaps becoming less concerned with satisfying their core supporters. In this sense, although leaders can and do adapt to context, such adaptations are not random but shaped by their personalities and characteristic styles. Structural pressures can also bring specific personality traits to the fore by making them more salient or by increasing their capacity to shape decisions, as with the tendency of foreign policy crises to prove the ‘mettle’ of leaders. Certain leaders’ personality traits can also be exaggerated and reinforced by structural or contextual changes, becoming more pronounced as a result (see Hermann, 2003; Kaarbo, 2021).

Thus, while structural constraints matter, how these are perceived and acted upon varies according to the characteristics of individual leaders, who interpret and frame issues in particular ways and make choices from available options that come to shape the direction of policy (Hermann, 2009). Because personality and structure both contribute to outcomes, isolating either analytically can be difficult, and outcomes will reflect traces of both. It is sometimes suggested, for instance, that a leader’s personality may change depending on the situation and that, as a result, studying personality loses its explanatory value. Yet this is to conflate personality with behaviour and reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of what personality assessments seek to achieve. Such approaches aim to understand how leaders perceive, interpret, and engage with their environments, rather than how their personalities determine courses of action. Thus, the focus is never on isolating personality from context, but rather on examining how the interaction between the two shapes decision-making.

## **Mr sensible? Assessments of Keir Starmer’s personality**

Keir Starmer entered Parliament as a Labour MP in 2015, during the party’s long spell in opposition, having previously served as Director of Public Prosecutions under the Labour and Coalition governments from 2008 to 2013. The son of a toolmaker and a nurse, the younger Starmer described himself as a Trotskyist, was associated with the Labour left, and supported Tony Benn’s leftist challenge to Neil Kinnock as Labour leader in 1988 (Fielding, 2021: 185). Following Ed Miliband’s resignation in 2015, the newly elected Starmer supported Andy Burnham in the leadership campaign that was subsequently won by the left-leaning Jeremy Corbyn. Under Corbyn’s leadership, Starmer was appointed to the Shadow Cabinet as Home Office minister, given his legal background, a position he subsequently resigned from in the aftermath of the 2016 Brexit referendum, as part of a broader insurrection against Corbyn’s leadership. After Corbyn’s re-election as Labour leader following the failed challenge, Starmer was appointed Shadow Brexit Secretary, a major role given Britain’s impending withdrawal from the Union and one that would

afford him considerable prominence in the public eye. Corbyn's resignation following the December 2019 general election afforded Starmer the opportunity for a successful run at the leadership, succeeding Corbyn on 4 April 2020. Amid declining support for the Conservatives, Starmer led the Labour Party to a significant victory in the July 2024 general election, obtaining a 174-seat majority and becoming Prime Minister on 5 July.

Assessments of Starmer's personality set forth by commentators and academics depict Starmer as a cautious technocrat who prioritises consensus but is prone to indecision. Existing assessments have emphasised Starmer's small-c conservatism and caution, especially when it comes to some of the bigger questions of British politics (e.g. Brexit) (Allin, 2024: 92; Ashcroft, 2021; Eagleton, 2022: 60). Starmer's approach is also held to be more conflict-averse, with Starmer seeking a more 'neutral' line through controversial issues, including transgender rights, antisemitism, and the Black Lives Matter protests (Burton-Cartledge, 2021: 198). He is associated with an integrative approach which seeks to build bridges between different ideological factions and 'develop an agenda that attracts a broad coalition of supporters' (Goes, 2021: 177). Existing assessments convey an emphasis on process exhibited by Starmer, such that political allies have nicknamed the leader 'Mr Rules', illustrative of a 'deep investment in a rules-based form of politics that seeks to uphold established standards of probity and competency in public office' (Johnson et al., 2024). Starmer is also held to be a detail-oriented person. Starmer's performance during Prime Minister's Questions has been described as 'forensic', with the implication that 'Starmer engages with politics like only a former lawyer can' (Johnson et al., 2024). Finally, Starmer is also depicted as a pragmatic leader. His 'sensible leadership' of the party is widely attested by observers (Brown, 2024: 11), and he has sought to present Labour's case for governing to the electorate in a sensible and moral way (Fielding, 2021: 190).

Yet Starmer's actions in his first year of office proved more decisive than initial assessments of his technocratic image suggested. In response to the far-right riots which rapidly spread around England in August 2024, Starmer focused on increasing capacity for temporary incarceration, enabling expedited punitive sentences for rioters, and adopting a strong law and order message. Starmer scrapped the winter fuel allowance and the two-child benefit cap as part of a broader package of welfare cuts, which proved highly unpopular with citizens and among his own MPs, but which were pushed through without compromise (BBC News, 2025a). In February 2025, as the Trump Presidency began signalling decreased American support for Ukraine, Starmer announced an increase in defence spending to 2.5% of gross domestic product (GDP), to be paid for through cuts to the foreign aid budget (BBC News, 2025b). And in March, he convened a summit of European leaders to discuss options for increasing European support to Kyiv, at which he proposed UK troops could enforce a ceasefire as part of a 'coalition of the willing' (BBC News, 2025c). The government's White Paper on migration, announced in the wake of rising support for Reform UK in the local elections, committed to significantly reducing net migration and was interpreted by some Labour MPs as a shift to the right (BBC News, 2025d).

We argue there are two main reasons that assessments of Starmer do not fully accord with the actions taken by the Prime Minister during his first year in power. The first is that there has been little to go on in terms of Starmer's personality and his governing experience, given his relatively recent move into frontline politics. Existing portrayals, therefore, rely heavily on a relatively small number of anecdotal observations from Starmer's time as leader of the opposition. This poses a problem not only because of the limited time

span, but also because leaders' traits can evolve in complex ways once they assume power, constraining what can be learned about them beforehand. Consequently, analyses of Starmer that draw primarily on observations from his period in opposition are unlikely to capture how these characteristics may interact with the political context after the election. The second reason is that existing assessments often rely on qualitative assessments of how Starmer presents himself. Given the limited time he has spent in frontline politics, Starmer has been freer than previous leaders to shape perceptions of his personality (Pike, 2024a: 28) and much of his focus as party leader has been on establishing in voters' minds the kind of leader he will be – a 'shorthand to tell the electorate who they are without telling them what they want' (Honeyman, 2023: 7). The corresponding risk is that assessments inadvertently buy into how Starmer wishes to depict himself as a political actor, rather than underlying personality traits.

## **An LTA of Keir Starmer**

To provide a more systematic assessment of Starmer's personality traits, we conduct an LTA of Starmer's position on seven key dimensions of leadership. Developed by Hermann (1980, 2003) LTA is one of the most widely used at-a-distance methods for evaluating the personalities of political leaders. The framework systematically analyses leaders' public communications to uncover their psychological characteristics. The central premise of LTA is that a leader's language, specifically the words and phrases they use most frequently, provides valuable insights into their personality (Hermann, 2003; Weintraub, 2003). Our approach has several advantages over existing qualitative assessments. First, it uses spontaneous responses as a means of getting at underlying personality traits rather than pre-scripted (and politically self-serving) representations crafted by the leader themselves. Second, it uses machine coding to analyse data rapidly, allowing for a significant amount of recent material to be incorporated into the analysis. Third, it allows for a systematic comparison with other leaders through quantification and its underlying conceptual basis in common underlying dimensions of personality traits.

Recognised for producing robust and reliable findings, LTA has been extensively applied in studies of leadership behaviour and decision-making, particularly in foreign policy contexts (e.g. Çuhadar et al., 2017a; Dyson, 2018; Van Esch and Swinkels, 2015). Studies have examined how personality traits shape decision-making, providing insights into leaders' involvement in wars, their decision to securitise issues, and their responses to crises and foreign policy failures (Brummer, 2016; Dyson, 2006; Schothöfer, 2024; Van Esch and Swinkels, 2015). The LTA framework can explain how differences in leaders' orientation to political constraints – whether they respect or challenge them – shape divergent foreign policy decisions in similar contexts (Dyson, 2007, 2024) It also demonstrates how shifts in leaders' traits can account for uncharacteristic policy decisions (Kesgin, 2019). Furthermore, its application has revealed connections between personality and populism, with traits such as high self-confidence and high distrust consistently influencing the foreign policy behaviour of populist leaders (Fouquet and Brummer, 2023).

LTA explains behavioural variation based on different configurations of personality traits, which lead to different expectations. By focusing on seven primary traits – belief in the ability to control events (BACE), conceptual complexity (CC), need for power (PWR), distrust of others (DIS), in-group bias (IGB), self-confidence (SC), and task orientation (TASK) – LTA captures a comprehensive picture of personality. These traits can be

**Table 1.** Personality traits in LTA.

Trait	Description
Belief that one can control events (BACE)	Interpretation of the degree of control in shaping outcomes
Need for power (PWR)	Need for establishing, maintaining or restoring one's power. Desire to influence others.
Conceptual complexity (CC)	Degree to which individuals are willing to consider multiple perspectives and recognise more than one dimension on issues.
Self-confidence (SC)	A sense of self-importance and the belief in one's ability to effectively manage interactions with people and situations.
In-group bias (IGB)	Preference for their group over outsiders.
Task focus (TASK)	Focus on achieving objectives versus maintaining relationships.
Distrust (DIS)	A general sense of doubt and caution towards others, characterised by a tendency to distrust their motives and actions.

Source: Adapted from Hermann (2003).

analysed individually or in combinations, allowing for nuanced profiles of leadership styles (see Table 1). Because the traits combine motives, cognitions, and characteristics often studied as separate variables, it is able to reflect the fact that personality is not 'a mere agglomeration of discrete and isolated individual variables, but rather a complex and integrated whole' (Winter, 2003: 38).

Leaders scoring high on the Ability to Control Events (BACE) and Need for Power (PWR) are more likely to adopt proactive and assertive measures, with low scores associated with compromise, delegation, and consensus (Hermann, 2003). Leaders who score higher on Conceptual Complexity (CC) than Self Confidence (SC) tend to be pragmatic and responsive to expert advice, often adopting inclusive, situationally adaptive strategies (Hermann, 2003). Conversely, when this is reversed, leaders are more likely to resist external advice, adopt rigid approaches, dismiss alternative viewpoints, and cherry-pick information that aligns with their preconceptions. Task-oriented leaders tend to push their teams towards achieving objectives, even at the expense of the group's morale. By contrast, relationship-oriented leaders prioritise group unity and may favour policies that maintain support, even if these conflict with external advice or long-term goals (Hermann, 2003). High levels of in-group bias can complicate decision-making, as leaders with strong attachments to their groups are more likely to violate international norms (Shannon and Keller, 2007). High distrust, meanwhile, can foster suspicion towards other actors, increasing the likelihood of non-cooperative and conflict-inducing behaviour (Kesgin, 2020; Renfro, 2013).

LTA depends on at-a-distance assessments of leaders' psychology, since direct access for conventional evaluations is rarely possible. Examining leaders' psychological characteristics is inherently complex and profiling them demands rigorous methods capable of producing conclusions comparable to those drawn in clinical settings. To overcome this challenge, researchers seeking to understand leaders' beliefs or personalities have increasingly employed content analysis techniques to conduct such evaluations. The central

premise of these at-a-distance assessments is that leaders' verbal behaviour provides valuable insight into their thoughts and individual characteristics. Proponents of methodologies involving leaders' verbal statements stress that linguistic behaviour is simply another form of behaviour, and as such, it can be meaningfully analysed for psychological insight, much like other observable compartments, pointing to consistent findings across multiple studies highlighting the validity of the underlying measures (Schafer, 2014).

The LTA employs a content analysis method with a quantitative approach based on frequency counts. This analysis has been automated through a software tool called Profiler Plus (version 7.3.19), developed by Social Science Automation Inc., which conducts word counts automatically. As an automated content analysis method, LTA enables the processing of large volumes of data, producing reliable, replicable, and comparable results that are not subject to the limitations of human coders, such as fatigue or subjectivity, yet cannot capture certain nuances of communication – such as irony or humour – which might be picked up in small-n studies. Each trait is operationalised to include specific elements that must be assessed to assign a score. For example, to evaluate a leader's level of distrust, LTA employs frequency counts to identify all words and phrases that express this trait (e.g. traitor, deceiving). Each personality trait follows its own internal logic regarding the vocabulary used in the assessment process (for a detailed explanation, see Hermann, 2003). Owing to the nature of the data generated by LTA and Profiler Plus, it is possible to compare a leader's results with those of a norming group, which may include global, regional, or country-specific leaders.

To avoid the risks associated with pre-scripted public discourse, LTA relies upon spontaneous verbal material, such as responses during press conferences and interviews, where leaders are less able to control their messaging. Unlike formal speeches, which are often drafted by professional speechwriters, spontaneous statements are more likely to reveal underlying personality traits, since leaders must think on their feet and respond in real-time. These situations offer fewer opportunities for deliberate image management, allowing their genuine dispositions to emerge more clearly. While it is true that even interviews may be partially rehearsed – for example, if questions are shared in advance – leaders still exhibit preferences for particular words, tones, and emphases, which constitute the subtle choices LTA is designed to capture. Indeed, empirical comparisons of leaders' spontaneous verbal outputs with their behaviour have established a meaningful correlation, suggesting the method can help us effectively assess underlying psychological traits (Schafer and Crichlow, 2000). To further reduce the risk of capturing strategic utterances, this study analyses a substantial amount of material covering diverse topics and directed towards varied audiences. By diversifying the material used and by including more than is necessary for a viable assessment, we can smooth out specific instances of individuals' strategic representations of their own personality tailored towards particular audiences.

In order to control for personality differences in opposition and office, we examine Starmer's LTA scores both before and after he assumed office on 4 July 2024, since this allows us to identify stable factors and chart any associated interactions with the strictures of office. For estimates of Starmer's scores in opposition, we drew on an earlier study by one of the authors, which analysed 39,107 words from 14 interviews conducted during the election campaign between 22 May and 2 July 2024 (Thiers, 2025). To ascertain Starmer's scores in government, we analysed 91,312 words drawn from a corpus of 45 verbatim remarks – including media interviews and responses during Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) – from the beginning of Starmer's premiership

**Table 2.** Starmer's LTA scores in opposition compared with UK Prime Ministers.<sup>1</sup>

Trait	Starmer's LTA and (Z-scores)	UK Prime Ministers' Means and SDs (n = 23)	Category
Distrust (DIS)	0.224 (1.8)	0.141 (0.05)	High
Task Orientation (TASK)	0.596 (-2.0)	0.664 (0.03)	Low
Belief in Ability to Control Events (BACE)	0.449 (3.9)	0.335 (0.03)	High
In-group Bias (IGB)	0.072 (-1.9)	0.106 (0.02)	Low
Self Confidence (SC)	0.410 (0.2)	0.401 (0.06)	Average
Conceptual Complexity (CC)	0.642 (1.7)	0.587 (0.03)	High
Need for Power (PWR)	0.328 (3.9)	0.233 (0.02)	High
N Words	39,107		
N Remarks	14		

until 24 March 2025. The volume of text for both analyses significantly exceeds the estimated 15,000-word threshold required to produce a reliable profile (Hermann, 2003). Both analyses utilised the recently published Psychological Characteristics of Leaders (PsyCL) dataset (Schafer and Lambert, 2022; Schafer et al., 2021), which includes updated LTA scores for 23 UK Prime Ministers. Data processing was conducted using Profiler Plus (version 7.3.19), a tool developed by Social Science Automation, Inc., which automates the evaluation of the seven traits identified in the LTA model. This computerisation allows for efficient handling of large datasets, enhances reliability, and reduces researcher bias.

LTA scores range from 0 to 1 and require norming to enable meaningful comparisons. To this end, several norming groups have been developed, allowing a leader's results on each trait to be assessed relative to those of other leaders. In this study, we use an existing norming group comprising 23 former UK Prime Ministers, which enables direct comparison between Starmer's scores and those of his predecessors in the same role. While the numerical differences may appear small, this is inherent to the scale; the LTA technique is specifically designed to detect subtle but meaningful variations in leadership traits that can significantly shape behaviour and decision-making.

## Results and discussion

Table 2 presents Keir Starmer's scores *in opposition* across the seven LTA personality traits, accompanied by his Z-scores, in relation to the mean scores of the norming group of 23 former UK Prime Ministers. A Z-score reflects how many standard deviations a score deviates from the mean, offering a standardised metric for comparing individual traits to the group average. Trait classifications – low, high, and moderate – are based on these deviations. A score exceeding one standard deviation above the mean designates the leader as high on that particular trait, while a score falling one standard deviation below indicates a low classification (Hermann, 2003).

Table 3 presents the scores for Starmer *in office* on the same dimensions and in relation to the same norming group of UK Prime Ministers. We summarise the principal differences between these in Table 4, which compares the scores and notes whether they are stable between the periods in question, or whether there exists any variation.

**Table 3.** Starmer's LTA scores in office compared with UK Prime Ministers.

Trait	Starmer's LTA and (Z-scores)	UK Prime Ministers' Means and SDs (n=23)	Category
Distrust (DIS)	0.201 (1.3)	0.141 (0.05)	High
Task Orientation (TASK)	0.667 (0.1)	0.664 (0.03)	Average
Belief in Ability to Control Events (BACE)	0.383 (1.6)	0.335 (0.03)	High
In-group Bias (IGB)	0.096 (-0.6)	0.106 (0.02)	Average
Self Confidence (SC)	0.458 (1.0)	0.401 (0.06)	High
Conceptual Complexity (CC)	0.593 (0.2)	0.587 (0.03)	Average
Need for Power (PWR)	0.290 (2.3)	0.233 (0.02)	High
N Words	<b>91,312</b>		
N Remarks	45		

**Table 4.** Starmer's changes from Candidate to Prime Minister.

Trait	Candidate LTA and (Z-scores)	In office LTA and (Z-scores)	Change
Distrust (DIS)	0.224 (1.8)	0.201 (1.3)	High-High (Stable)
Task Orientation (TASK)	0.596 (-2.0)	0.667 (0.1)	Low-Average (Increased)
Belief in Ability to Control Events (BACE)	0.449 (3.9)	0.383 (1.6)	High-High (Stable)
In-group Bias (IGB)	0.072 (-1.9)	0.096 (-0.6)	Low-Average (Decreased)
Self Confidence (SC)	0.410 (0.2)	0.458 (1.0)	Low-High (Increased)
Conceptual Complexity (CC)	0.642 (1.7)	0.593 (0.2)	High-Average (Decreased)
Need for Power (PWR)	0.328 (3.9)	0.290 (2.3)	High-High (Stable)
N Words	39,107	91,312	
N Remarks	14	45	

A comparison of Starmer's LTA traits as a candidate and Prime Minister reveals both notable changes and enduring similarities. In terms of the changes, Starmer appears more extreme on the campaign trail, with six of the seven traits registering either above or below the mean, whereas in office his profile was more balanced. Among the key changes, his task orientation shifted from low to average, indicating that as a candidate, he was more focused on relationships, while as Prime Minister, he is less inclined to devote effort to pleasing his audience or sustaining morale. His in-group bias also rose from very low to average, suggesting that during the campaign, he was more motivated to cultivate broad connections and seize opportunities to reach wider audiences. In contrast, his self-confidence increased considerably in office, likely reflecting the reassurance of his new position. Finally, his conceptual complexity declined from high to average, implying that as a candidate, he placed greater emphasis on demonstrating openness to multiple perspectives and nuance. It is notable that none of his traits shifted from one extreme to the other; rather, they reverted towards the profile more typical of an average UK Prime Minister.

How are we to interpret these changes? The fact that Starmer presented himself differently before taking office, particularly in visible aspects such as his emphasis on relationships over tasks and his reduced focus on the in-group to appear more attuned to the public, may help explain the gap between earlier expectations and his current governing style. It also illustrates how Starmer's traits interact with the different contexts he has encountered, which aligns with the literature on personality. His stable characteristics likely shaped his strategic approach to campaigning.

While the changes are revealing and potentially significant, Starmer remains stable on three relevant personality traits which diverge from existing expectations regarding his personality. As Table 3 above shows, Starmer's profile after election to office depicts a leader who differs significantly from the average UK former Prime Minister in four of the seven traits. Starmer continues to display a high level of distrust compared with other UK leaders, maintains a strong perception of his ability to control events, and retains a pronounced need for power. In contrast to the scores for his time on the campaign trail, Starmer's Self-Confidence has increased relative to other leaders following his ascendancy to the premiership.

Taken together, these traits suggest Starmer is more of a constraint-challenger than is typically acknowledged, while also remaining receptive to new information. They are noteworthy in three respects. First, they diverge significantly from existing expectations of Starmer, indicating that his underlying personality traits differ from those anticipated by observers. Second, they represent combinations commonly observed together in existing LTA scholarship, which point towards broader constraint-challenging behaviours (e.g. Rohrer, 2014; Van Esch and Swinkels, 2015). Third, high scores are observed across three of the four traits in both opposition and government, suggesting they reflect deeper aspects of his leadership personality rather than being artefacts of his position. Moreover, because they span his time campaigning and governing, they help us better understand Starmer's actions in both periods.

## Implications of Starmer's personality traits

What are the implications of these scores for Starmer's behaviour and policy decisions? In the sections that follow, we spell out the expected behaviours associated with each trait on which Starmer scores highly, as depicted in Table 5 below. We also reflect on how these have contributed to key actions and decisions undertaken by the Labour leader, drawing on examples from foreign policy and UK politics in both opposition and government. Our intention is not to deploy personality deterministically, but rather to show where it acts as a necessary condition shaping Starmer's responses to broader circumstances. In so doing, we show that under-appreciated aspects of the Prime Minister's personality – namely, his constraint-challenging nature – have shaped key decisions in important ways and thus warrant active consideration by analysts.

*Distrust:* Distrustful leaders are characterised by doubt and suspicion, often questioning the motives and actions of others, particularly competitors or opponents. This can result in a reluctance to delegate, as leaders take control to prevent perceived sabotage, with loyalty becoming a critical requirement for collaboration. Distrustful leaders may adopt a zero-sum worldview, be hypersensitive to criticism, and remain vigilant for threats to their authority (Hermann, 2003). Distrust has been associated with a willingness to violate norms (Shannon and Keller, 2007) and to challenge constraints (Fitzsimmons, 2022: 41) and with uncooperative and hawkish behaviours in the

**Table 5.** Implications of Starmer’s scores.

	High Belief in the Ability to Control Events	High Need for Power	High Self-Confidence
High Distrust			
Questioning motives of others	Proactive, Challenge constraints, Expansionist Foreign Policy	Shape environment to achieve goals	Less inclined to seek feedback
Loyalty requirement	Direct responsibility for planning and execution (and avoid delegation)	Aggressive policy behaviour	Filter and reject incoming discrepant information
Hawkish behaviours and dispute initiation	Favour person-to-person interactions	Domestic friction	Prone to rash decisions and potential fiascos
Emphasis on institutionalising cooperation	Less adaptable and less inclined to compromise		Decisive leadership styles
More likely to challenge constraints	Prone to poor decision-making		Longer tenure and public support

international arena (Kesgin, 2020). For instance, George W. Bush's high level of distrust reinforced erroneous beliefs that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction – a key trigger for the 2003 invasion (Renfro, 2013). Distrustful individuals are also more prone to initiate disputes with other states during periods of economic hardship, interpreting challenges as threats to their authority (Foster and Keller, 2020).

*Ability to Control Events:* This trait reflects a leader's confidence in their capacity to influence outcomes and drive change. Such leaders are proactive and take direct responsibility for planning and execution, often avoiding delegation to maintain control. They frequently monitor subordinates, make unannounced visits, and favour face-to-face interactions to ensure progress aligns with their expectations (Hermann, 2003). While this confidence fosters decisiveness, it can also reduce adaptability and collaboration, as these leaders are less inclined to compromise, trusting their own judgement above all. Leaders with a high belief in their ability to control events are more likely to seek to challenge existing constraints (Fitzsimmons, 2022: 41). They may also be more willing to engage directly in decision-making, less likely to challenge information, and more susceptible as a result to poor-quality decision-making (see Kaarbo, 2021: 430).

*Need for Power:* Leaders with a high need for power are intensely focused on shaping their environment to achieve their goals, often employing persuasion, manipulation, or forceful actions to do so, and will test existing boundaries to maximise their influence (Hermann, 2003). As such, the increased need for power can inform more aggressive policy behaviour on behalf of leaders (Fouquet and Brummer, 2025: 5; Shannon and Keller, 2007). While need for power is associated with a higher perceived effectiveness on behalf of citizens (Rohrer, 2014), the resulting tendency to treat allies instrumentally can lead to friction over time if followers feel exploited or disconnected. When combined with a high belief in their ability to control events, need for power can push leaders to test the limits of what is possible, leading to constraint-challenging behaviour (Hermann, 2003). For example, Blair's strong Belief in his ability to control events, low conceptual complexity, and high need for power arguably shaped UK decision-making in relation to Iraq (Dyson, 2006), while Gordon Brown's strong belief in his ability to control events, coupled with a pronounced need for power, contributed to his decisive approach to crisis management during the 2007–08 financial crisis (Dyson, 2018).<sup>2</sup>

*Self-confidence:* Leaders with strong self-confidence possess a robust sense of self-worth and are correspondingly comfortable in their ability to enact their duties and disinclined to seek feedback to reassess themselves (Hermann, 2003). Self-confidence is associated with 'decisive leadership styles' and with the maintenance of control in difficult situations, and as such is associated with a longer tenure in office (Rohrer, 2025: 4). Yet such leaders may filter incoming information in ways that reinforce existing beliefs, and higher self-confidence is associated with leaders embroiled in major foreign policy failures, suggesting they may have embarked on hasty decisions without fully evaluating available information or considering alternative courses of action (Brummer, 2016). Where self-confidence *and* belief in one's ability to control events are elevated, personality traits can take precedence over situational factors in shaping threat perception as well as perceived 'ownership' of crises (Van Esch and Swinkels, 2015).<sup>3</sup>

## Understanding Starmer's behaviour

Starmer's profile is that of a more uncompromising and decisive leader. He scores highly on distrust, self-confidence, belief in the ability to control events, and need for power,

reinforcing the sense that his underlying personality traits are less conciliatory than those of comparable leaders. The expectation that emerges is of a leader likely to challenge constraints, engage in hawkish policy decisions, make decisions decisively, opt for personalised decision-making and person-to-person contact, and be less open to compromise and feedback (thus prone to domestic frictions). In this section, we illustrate how knowledge of Starmer's leadership traits can help us understand his actions in opposition and office, focusing on (1) his rise to Labour leader and actions as Prime Minister at home, and (2) his conduct of foreign affairs since assuming the premiership.

### *1. Starmer at home*

Corbyn's departure in the aftermath of the December 2019 general election presented an opportunity for Starmer to stand in the ensuing Labour leadership election in February 2020. Indeed, Starmer had carefully prepared the ground for a leadership contest after the 2019 election, appointing advisers and convening regular meetings to discuss strategy in the event of a large defeat (Baldwin, 2024: 250–253). He was thus able to act decisively in the aftermath of the election defeat. Positioning himself as an advocate of Corbyn-era policies (Heppell, 2022: 372) and benefitting from the profile afforded him by the Shadow Brexit Secretary role, Starmer rapidly emerged as a front-runner in the campaign (Burton-Cartledge, 2021: 196). Starmer's balancing act succeeded in attracting support from both wings of the party (Allin, 2024: 92), although it was generally the 'soft left' rather than the far left that supported Starmer (Jeffery et al., 2024: 407), with around one third of those who voted for Starmer seeking continuity rather than change from the Corbyn era (Fielding, 2021).

Once elected, Starmer's leftist credentials became muted, establishing a centrist Shadow Cabinet and moving away from several of his more Corbynite 'ten pledges', especially on immigration and healthcare (Webb, 2023: 384). Starmer's move was not an embrace of the free market, as had occurred under Blair, but rather the return to a 'soft left' position more akin to Fabian social democracy than support for extra-parliamentary class struggle (Thompson et al., 2021: 32). In April 2020, Starmer backed an independent review that would subsequently lead to Corbyn's expulsion from the party, and in June, he sacked Rebecca Long-Bailey after she refused to apologise for retweeting a claim some deemed to be antisemitic. Starmer's messaging sought to move away from association with 'isms' and the central policy commitments beyond the revival of flagging economic growth were difficult to pin down (Jackson, 2023:6), something which grated with factions on either side keen to understand what the new leader stood for (Goes, 2021: 183).

Combined with Starmer's gradual move away from elements of Corbyn's legacy, these moves led many on the left of the party to brand Starmer a 'centrist' or 'Red Tory' (Barnfield and Bale, 2022) and precipitated a break between Momentum and other leftist groupings and the party leadership (Massey, 2020: 5). Eagleton (2022) characterised his project as a cynical 'journey to the right'. However, the direction of the ideological changes here is of less interest to us than the way they removed sources of dissent. Over the course of the period in opposition, Starmer removed MPs associated with Corbyn from the front bench and kept a tight control over candidate selection for the 2024 general election. Starmer was accused of 'freezing out left-wingers and promoting his supporters' (BBC News, 2024). The removal of internal sources of opposition to his project was a central part of his strategy to re-establish control over the party machine and make the Labour Party electable.

Despite internal criticism, Starmer's broader strategy was successful, with the Labour leader presiding over an increasing lead in the opinion polls. Starmer's personal polling was a part of this, and he scored higher than his predecessor and successive Conservative leaders, with strong scores on likeability, competence, and looking 'prime ministerial' (Burton-Cartledge, 2021: 194). However, the Labour Party also benefitted hugely from Conservative unforced errors, including the 'partygate' scandal under Johnson and the Conservatives' loss of their reputation for economic competence following Liz Truss's brief spell as Prime Minister.

The wider structural context for the Starmer premiership has been a state under pressure. The UK economy has never recovered from the impact of the 2008 financial crisis, and this erosion of state capacity was subsequently exacerbated by the pandemic and Britain's departure from the European Union (EU). The Starmer Government inherited public finances under strain and has had to deal with persistent inflation since coming to office. This inheritance severely constrained the Government's room for manoeuvre fiscally, and the Government's options for revenue-raising were also limited by its promise not to raise income tax, national insurance, or VAT. Starmer's approach to domestic political issues has been characterised by unforced errors that have had to be gradually unwound in an exercise in damage limitation.

In addition to raising taxes, the Government also attempted to find savings by cutting back on welfare provisions in a manner that was likely to encounter resistance from Labour MPs and some voters. In late 2024, the Government abolished the Winter Fuel Payment for pensioners and then, in 2025, attempted to remove £5 billion from the sickness benefits bill by tightening eligibility criteria. In both these cases, Starmer initially defended the toughness of the decisions and emphasised the constrained circumstances. However, the Winter Fuel decision was highly unpopular with voters and was partially reversed for poorer pensioners the following year. Similarly, Labour MPs forced the Government to climb down on the welfare cuts by threatening not to vote for them.

In both these cases, the Government had to repent at leisure from a rash decision that was not part of a wider strategy. In the case of the welfare cuts, for example, they were not presented as part of a broader plan to reform the welfare system in a better direction (and therefore did not include any carrots as well as sticks that might have persuaded Labour MPs to vote for them as part of a wider suite of changes). Starmer failed to take advice on the likely scale of the rebellion until it was too late.

Starmer's leadership style has also created tensions about staffing. His appointment of the former senior civil servant Sue Gray as his chief of staff in opposition did not survive the move into government. Starmer removed Gray within 4 months of becoming Prime Minister. He replaced her with Morgan McSweeney, who had been advising Starmer since before his leadership campaign. The wider Downing Street operation has also been characterised by churn of staff. As the *Financial Times* noted in September 2025: 'Only six out of 20 unelected aides who helped bring Starmer to power are still working for or advising the prime minister, a remarkable rate of attrition' (Parker and Pickard, 2025). The resignation of Angela Rayner from the Government following revelations about her tax affairs necessitated ministerial changes. However, Starmer's reshuffle in September 2025 also demonstrated a decisiveness that baffled some colleagues who were at a loss to discern a wider strategy (Parker and Bounds, 2025). The sacking of Ian Murray as Secretary of State for Scotland caused such upset among MPs that he had to be swiftly found another junior ministerial role in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

Starmer was also forced to sack Lord Mandelson as Ambassador to the United States after emails between him and Jeffrey Epstein were published.

Starmer's less compromising personality traits shine through in several aspects of his rise to the leadership and his conduct of domestic policy. Despite his image as a consensus-seeking politician, his quest for the leadership illustrates a more Machiavellian side consistent with his high need for power: careful courting of leftist actors while they comprised the main gatekeepers, followed by a significant shift to the centre-ground thereafter. Subsequent efforts to remove leftist dissent within the party reinforce the suggestion that he distrusted potential opposition and was unwilling to accept divergence from his line. In office, despite his cautious image, bold policies have been enacted without full consideration of political consequences, and Starmer has proved highly resistant to changing course until almost all political capital has been spent. The result is a sub-optimal combination of all pain and no gain, which may help explain his historically low popularity scores (YouGov, 2025). This behaviour aligns with his high perception of his ability to challenge constraints and his need for power, which prompts leaders to test limits before adhering to a course of action and can also explain his seemingly rushed decisions that were partially reversed later. His changes in staff and cabinet members are consistent with expectations for a highly distrustful leader who values loyalty and remains wary of others' intentions. While very real structural constraints lie behind the Prime Minister's efforts to limit public spending, many in both Labour and Conservative parties have been surprised at Starmer's willingness to undertake such high-profile 'own goals' in this domain.

## 2. *Starmer on the world stage*

Starmer came to power at a time of considerable international insecurity, with Russian advances in Ukraine following Moscow's February 2022 full-scale invasion putting the Western-backed effort on the back foot and leading to increasing domestic opposition to what had previously been a common line. The ongoing Gaza War, following the 7 October 2023 Hamas terrorist attacks and Israel's retaliatory ground invasion, added to this unstable regional environment and highlighted increasing divergence between Europe and the United States on the Middle East. Meanwhile, Brexit had diminished the UK's global reputation, undermined its economic competitiveness, and led to the severing of formal security cooperation with Europe at a time of heightened insecurity and transatlantic divergence (Webber, 2023). The subsequent election of Donald Trump as US President in November placed the UK and European allies in an increasingly difficult situation. Trump's desire for a quick solution to the war in Ukraine, his willingness to countenance ceding territory for an agreement, and his seeming sympathies towards Putin all pointed to European and Ukrainian interests being swept aside as Washington and Moscow agreed a deal over their heads (Schnapper, 2025). Moreover, Trump's election raised fears that NATO credibility would diminish, given the President's clear equivocation on the alliance's value and his forceful demands that allies increase their defence spending (e.g. Schuette, 2024).

Trump's election amid the worsening regional security environment brought about pressures which would have pushed any leader towards more active efforts to shore up the UK's position, re-double efforts to defend Ukrainian interests, and re-engage with European allies. And yet individual responses to these pressures were not predetermined and could take many forms. Responses to these tendencies could prioritise force

or diplomacy, involve different ways of making foreign policy decisions, seek to make different kinds of trade-offs to fund these activities, and pursue distinct kinds of relationships with partners. Indeed, previous Prime Ministers facing similar pressures had deferred difficult decisions on defence spending, sought to keep re-engagement with European security under the radar, and pursued a gradual evolution of their predecessors' policies (Sus and Martill, 2024).

Starmer's particular leadership can be seen in his response to Trump's efforts to negotiate a peace agreement with Putin without Kyiv or the European capitals present, which brought about a multi-pronged strategic and diplomatic effort from Starmer – in concert with allies – to secure European and Ukraine interests. Direct talks between the United States and Russia took place between 23–25 February 2025 in Saudi Arabia (White House, 2025). On 25 February, Starmer announced that UK defence spending would rise to 2.5% of GDP by 2027, partially funded by cuts to the UK's development aid budget (BBC News, 2025b). While previous Conservative governments had bandied around similar figures, the timelines had been vaguer, and the means of defraying the costs of these future targets not identified. Two days later, Starmer visited Washington for talks with Trump, brandishing an offer of a second State Visit – signed by King Charles, but drafted by Downing Street – which visibly moved Trump (Prior, 2025). The diplomatic gambit was depicted by observers in the United Kingdom as a cringeworthy yet carefully calculated effort to enhance the UK's standing with the President (The Guardian, 2025). Ukrainian President Zelenskyy's meeting with Trump on 28 February resulted in a fiery exchange in which the US President accused Ukraine of stoking the conflict. Starmer sought to place himself in the role of mediator, speaking with both sides in the aftermath in order to facilitate a rapprochement (BBC News, 2025e).

In March, Starmer convened European leaders in London with the aim of establishing a clear European voice in ongoing discussions about the conditions under which a cease-fire might operate, proposing a 'coalition of the willing' to guarantee Ukrainian security (BBC News, 2025c). The proposal placed the United Kingdom in the driving seat of European efforts to gain a stake in any negotiated outcome while also aiming to reassure Ukraine against future Russian aggression and assuage US concerns regarding burden sharing. On 8 May, Starmer announced a trade deal with the United States that would drastically reduce the tariffs paid by UK businesses in light of Trump's 2 April 'Liberation Day' announcement of sweeping tariffs (Prior, 2025). While the agreement was a 'least bad' outcome and while other leaders sought similar deals with Trump, Starmer's agreement was notably quick off the mark and reflected his concerted diplomatic efforts to court the Trump administration. Two weeks later, at the UK-EU summit in London in May, Starmer unveiled his 'reset' of the UK's relationship with the EU, including proposals for a closer relationship in a host of areas (youth experience, phytosanitary, emissions trading, internal security) and a Security and Defence Partnership (SDP) (Schnapper, 2025). The proposals, to be negotiated and implemented over the coming years, built on previous proposals but shifted prior UK red lines, including an aversion to dynamic alignment with EU rules and formal security cooperation (Rutter, 2025).

As the examples above show, Starmer's foreign policy actions are shaped by his personality traits in important ways. His foreign policy actions speak to his decisive, constraint-challenging personality in a number of respects. His decisions are hawkish for a Labour leader, with an emphasis on the deployment of military force, the active deterrence of threats, and increased military spending. Moreover, they are more decisive in many ways than those of his predecessors, who talked up defence spending without

implementing corresponding cuts and who sought re-engagement with European security outside of new structures. There is also a clear willingness to go beyond existing positions, including both in European policy – an area where Labour has been deliberately cautious – and with respect to proposals to deploy UK troops on the ground in Ukraine. The manner in which Starmer’s decisions have been taken betrays a deep-seated confidence, and observers have noted both how comfortable the Prime Minister appears on the world stage (Pike, 2024b). Key foreign policy decisions, including painful ones, have been maintained amid domestic disquiet, something observed also in Starmer’s domestic policy, suggesting a self-assuredness and a willingness to stick with contentious decisions. Starmer’s high-level diplomacy shows a preference for direct personal engagement rather than delegation to lower levels of government, with the result being a relatively high profile for the Prime Minister on the international stage, which seems at odds with his ostensibly task-oriented demeanour. His behaviour and tendency to double down on his policies align with expectations for leaders under crisis, during which their traits – especially those scoring highly – become accentuated (Hermann, 2003). Thus, foreign affairs is another area where one can see clear traces of Starmer’s more assertive and constraint-challenging personality. As a result, our conceptual findings can help shed light on the surprising assertiveness of Starmer as a foreign policy actor, which has surprised observers (BBC News, 2025).

## Conclusion

While assessments of Starmer’s personality have depicted the Labour leader as a technocratic, mild-mannered, and conciliatory individual, his first year of governing shows a more decisive and uncompromising side to the UK Prime Minister. This discrepancy between expectations and actions suggests the need for a more systematic appraisal of Starmer’s personality. In this article, we conducted the first LTA assessment of Starmer’s personality, using unguarded statements to estimate Starmer’s scores on seven personality traits during his time on the campaign trail and as Prime Minister, which were then used to build a composite profile. Our results show that Starmer scores highly compared with UK Prime Ministers on four distinct traits: (1) distrust, (2) belief in ability to control events, (3) need for power, and (4) self-confidence, with three of these – distrust, belief in ability to control events, and need for power – also characterising his time in opposition. The resulting profile is of a more uncompromising leader than expectations have often led observers to believe, speaking to a leadership style which is more likely to challenge constraints, centralise decision-making and eschew compromise or consultation. We demonstrated in the subsequent empirical section how understanding these traits can help us to account for Starmer’s actions in recent years, both in opposition and in government.

Our findings provide the first systematic, at-a-distance estimation of Starmer’s personality on the basis of the LTA traits, helping us build a clearer image of his personality, which can then be compared systematically with other leaders. As well as being valuable for its own sake, our findings also help us to account for the apparent discrepancy between, on the one hand, Starmer’s political self-image and qualitative assessments which by-and-large reinforce this, and some of his more decisive and uncompromising actions once in office, on the other hand. By linking specific scores to the theoretical expectations within the existing literature, we are able to better understand how Starmer’s personality traits have influenced key decisions and shaped real-world outcomes on important issues,

from welfare reform to the UK response to the Ukraine War. Finally, our findings regarding the subtle distinctions in Starmer's personality scores between his time in opposition and in government can help us to understand how leadership traits are shaped by the positions these actors inhabit, an area of considerable current interest in LTA scholarship (e.g. Çuhadar et al., 2017b; Rabini et al., 2020). We show that Starmer's personality is stable in important ways across the two periods, while also demonstrating the moderating effects resulting from his assumption of the premiership.

Observation of Starmer's traits can also inform expectations of his future behaviour. Knowing that Starmer's personality bears the hallmarks of a constraint-challenger, we might reasonably infer that future policy proposals would tend towards more radical or untested ideas. In external affairs, Starmer's policy choices may tend towards the hawkish end of the spectrum, potentially including the use or threat of force. Given Starmer's moderate conceptual complexity, his decisions are unlikely to be rash or compulsive, but they may still embody a significant shift away from what is currently thought possible. Starmer's personality traits are associated with a decision-making style that is decisive and is not quick to adapt in the face of criticism, leading us to anticipate further intransigence from Starmer as the Prime Minister 'sticks to his guns', even for unpopular decisions. Starmer is likely to prioritise trusted allies, and policy decisions are likely to bear his imprimatur rather than reflecting broader pressure from the party or collective decision-making. His personality traits suggest he is more likely to favour information that aligns with his existing beliefs, and this may make it more difficult for discrepant information to reach him. We may reasonably anticipate that Starmer's personality will be valuable in moments of crisis, given his willingness to act decisively, and that he will weather moments of potential rupture well. But there is also a sense in which his steadfastness could contribute to a growing disconnect with citizens' demands over time.

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### Notes

1. Scores displayed in Table 2 are adapted from Thiers (2025).
2. This may be contrasted with Wilson's low need for power and ability to control events which informed the 'constraint respecter' approach shaping his refusal to support the Vietnam War (Dyson, 2007).

3. This relationship can be mediated by openness to information. For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Nicola Sturgeon's greater openness to incoming information facilitated flexible, evidence-based decision-making, in contrast to Johnson's limited openness and reliance on intuition, which resulted in delays and inconsistent policy responses (Thiers and Wehner, 2023).

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