The impact of dark tetrad traits on political orientation and extremism: an analysis in the course of a presidential election

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Abstract

Previous research on personality and political attitudes has been conducted in countries where political parties from the center dominate the political system. In the present research (N = 675), we focus on the relationship between the dark side of human personality and political orientation and extremism, respectively, in the course of a presidential election where the two candidates represent either left-wing or right-wing political policies. Narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and everyday sadism were associated with right-wing political orientation and extremism, whereas narcissism and psychopathy were associated with political extremism. Moreover, the relationships between personality and right-wing political orientation and extremism, respectively, were relatively independent from each other.

Keywords: Political science, Sociology, Psychology

1. Introduction

The Austrian presidential election in 2016 was a historic one, because this was the first time since the Second World War that an Austrian president had not been backed by either of the two governing center-left Social Democratic and center-right Austrian People's parties. The two candidates who made it to the second
round (after none of the candidates received a majority of votes cast in the first round) were Alexander Van der Bellen, former head of the Austrian Green party, representing a left-wing political attitude, and Norbert Hofer, candidate for the Freedom Party of Austria, representing right-wing policies. Van der Bellen then became the first European head of state with a green background. In the present research, we were interested in how the personalities of those voting for the left-wing and the right-wing candidate, respectively, would differ. Concretely, we examined to which extent the Dark Tetrad (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and everyday sadism) would predict political orientation as well as political extremism.

### 1.1. Political attitudes and the dark side of human personality

Political attitudes and electoral behavior can be explained by different personality variables, but those representing dark personalities seem to have a particularly important impact on political extremism and election of politicians and political parties who are considered right- or left-wing. According to Paulhus and Williams (2002), there are three distinct dimensions that represent the dark side of human personality (labelled the Dark Triad): narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. Narcissism is associated with self-idealization, pretension, and the need for admiration (Raskin and Hall, 1979). Machiavellianism is associated with misanthropy, cynicism, pragmatism, lack of empathy, manipulation, immoral beliefs, and self-interest (for a review, Jones and Paulus, 2011). Psychopathy as a personality trait involves lack of empathy, fearlessness, hubris, and social misbehavior (Board and Fritzon, 2005). The factor that was added last to the dark personality model and turned the Dark Triad into the Dark Tetrad was everyday sadism (Buckels et al., 2013; Chabrol et al., 2009). Everyday sadism is conceptually distinct in that this trait in particular is associated with the need to harm others physically or emotionally and feeling joy while doing it (Greitemeyer, 2015; Greitemeyer and Sagioglou, 2017; Pfattheicher and Schindler, 2015; Reidy et al., 2011). However, it should be noted that everyday sadism is positively related to the other dark personalities, in particular with psychopathy and Machiavellianism (e.g., Book et al., 2016; Mededović and Petrović, 2015). Overall, although everyday sadism can be considered a unique construct, it is associated with psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism and, hence, a similar pattern of associations between everyday sadism and political orientation and political extremism, respectively, as for the other Dark Tetrad traits can be expected.

Previous research on the relationship between the dark side of human personality and political orientation has been conducted in countries where political parties from the center dominate the political system. For example, one study—employing U.S. American samples—has shown that narcissism and psychopathy were associated with political conservatism, whereas Machiavellianism was associated
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