



Personality correlates of party preference: The Big Five in five big European countries

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ABSTRACT

The Big Five Model was used to assess the role of personality traits in orienting voting choice across five European countries ($n = 1288$). Findings from Italy, Spain, Germany, Greece, and Poland showed that the Big Five were linked to party preference in theoretically consistent ways. Traits had substantial effects on voting, whereas the socio-demographic characteristics of gender, age, income, and educational level had weaker influences. In each country, voters' traits are seemingly congruent with the policies of their preferred party. The Openness trait has been shown to be the most generalizable predictor of party preference across the examined cultures. Conscientiousness was also a valid predictor, although its effect was less robust and replicable. Similarities and differences across countries were discussed and linked to the nature of the respective political discourses.

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1. Introduction

After a long period of relative neglect, personality traits received scholarly attention in research on political behavior in recent years. Leaving aside studies dealing with political participation (Mondak, 2010), scholars found distinct personality profiles on the Big Five (John, 1990) to be associated with preferences for different political parties and ideologies. Among the Big Five, Openness predicts liberal and left-wing political views in a wide range of countries, including Germany (Riemann, Grubich, Hempel, Mergl, & Richter, 1993; Schoen & Schumann, 2007), Italy (Caprara, Schwartz, Capanna, Vecchione, & Barbaranelli, 2006; Caprara, Schwartz, Vecchione, & Barbaranelli, 2008), Belgium and Poland (Van Hiel, Kossowska, & Mervielde, 2000), and the US (Barbaranelli, Caprara, Vecchione, & Fraley, 2007; Carney, Jost, Gosling, Niederhoffer, & Potter, 2008; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003; Jost, 2006). The Conscientiousness trait predicts conservative and right-wing political views. Unlike Openness and Conscientiousness, Energy/Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Emotional Stability have weaker and less consistent relationships with political orientation. Yet, prior

research is limited to specific political settings and mostly focused on measures of political conservatism and/or liberalism and ideological self-placement.

The current study expands on past work by examining the effect of the Big Five on vote choice in five European countries that differ widely in terms of cultural and historical roots. We build on the notion that personality traits serve as distal predictors of vote choice. Traits are stable dispositions that are partially inherited and formed early in life. In interaction with environmental factors, these dispositions shape socio-political attitudes, value orientation, and policy preferences (Caprara, Vecchione, & Schwartz, 2009; Lee, Ashton, Ogunfowora, Bourdage, & Shin 2010; McCrae, 1996; Sibley & Duckitt, 2008), which in turn affect vote choice. Voters, inter alia, aim at voting for a party that does not contradict their ideological and policy predisposition. In a nutshell, vote choice is rooted in personality traits since citizens vote for parties whose ideological and policy stances fit their ideological preferences, that in turn are affected by basic personality dispositions.

We examined the impact of traits on voting in five European countries, by exploring whether findings are consistent across nations that differ considerably in terms of political systems, party systems, and democratic tradition. We first studied Italy, Spain, Germany, and Greece. In these four countries, the political system

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is essentially organized around two ideological poles (left and right) and includes two dominant center-left and center-right parties. We then extended the study to Poland, where the current electoral competition is taking place between two main right-wing parties. This represents a rather unusual case in the European political scene. Taken together, this analysis may contribute to deepen our understanding of voting behavior in a cross-national perspective, which is a central theme of political science (Mondak, 2010).

In each country, we focused on the choice between the two main parties around which most of the electoral competition revolves. We then included voters of minor parties, when the number of cases was large enough to obtain reliable estimates. Thereby, we expand on prior research which mostly ignored third parties' voters or conflated them with the voters of main parties. Both strategies are flawed because third parties have gained in political significance and have specific ideological and policy stances that distinguish them from main parties.

2. Hypotheses

In specifying hypotheses on the impact of traits on voting, we rely on the notion that high scores on personality traits increase the likelihood of casting a vote for parties with a specific ideological and policy profile. Two dimensions give structure to political competition in a variety of countries. The socio-economic, or left–right, dimension refers to the role of government in the economy with left-wing citizens being supportive of state intervention into the economy. The second dimension refers to social issues with left-wing citizens being tolerant of new life-styles and conservatives championing traditional values (Benoit & Laver, 2006). In Italy, Spain, Germany, and Greece, the main parties are center-right or center-left on both dimensions. In Poland, the two main parties are both center-right, although the Civic Platform party (PO) is more left-wing on social issues than the Law and Justice party (PiS), which is more left-wing on economic issues than its main competitor. Since in the current Polish political debate social issues are dominating over economic ones, we henceforth treat PO as center-left party and PiS as a center-right. The third parties included in our analysis resemble each other in policy terms because they are left-wing on both dimensions but differ from traditional center-left parties in that they put special emphasis on social issues.

We hypothesized that high scores on Openness increase the likelihood of casting a vote for parties that hold left-wing stances on social issues. This trait predicts support for change and tolerance of new ideas and has been shown to be negatively related with Right-Wing Authoritarianism (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008), and with Hierarchy (vs. Equality) Orientation and Social Conformity (vs. Change) Orientation, two broad dimensions of socio-political attitudes strongly related to individuals' preference for right-wing ideologies (Lee et al., 2010). We therefore expect that high scores on this trait are associated with voting for center-left parties. Moreover, we propose large effects of Openness on vote choice for the minor left parties, which put particular emphasis on their liberal stance on social issues.

High scorers on Conscientiousness are inclined to obey social rules calling for impulse control. As a result, Conscientiousness should increase the likelihood of casting a vote for center-right parties, which have a conservative stance on social issues. This also comports with the view that conservatives are more motivated than liberals by norm attainment, order, and support of the status quo (Jost, 2006). We also expect that high scores on Agreeableness increase the likelihood of casting a vote for left parties, which support the welfare state. The Agreeableness trait is indeed negatively related with social dominance orientation, namely a general attitudinal orientation toward intergroup relations reflecting the extent

to which one prefers hierarchical relations in the society and an unequal distribution of resources (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Given the emphasis Italy's main center-right party puts on free-enterprise, we expect that Energy/Extraversion predicts a preference for this party (Caprara et al., 2006, 2008). Finally, we do not expect any specific effect of Emotional Stability on vote choice because this trait does not appear to relate to a specific policy dimension.

3. Method

3.1. Participants and procedures

Self-report questionnaires were administered to members of the adult population eligible to vote in Italy ($n = 458$), Spain ($n = 146$), Germany ($n = 147$), Greece ($n = 211$), and Poland ($n = 316$). In each country, data were gathered by university students who were briefed on the general aims of the research and instructed on how to administer the questionnaires. Each student earned course credits for his/her participation, which consisted in filling out the questionnaires and collecting data from two to four people, balancing age and gender. All participants were informed and consented to participate in the study. They were assured that their responses were anonymous. Data were collected as part of a course assignment at the universities of Rome (Italy), Burgos (Spain), Mainz (Germany), Athens (Greece), and Warsaw (Poland). Response rates in the various countries ranged from 85% (Spain) to 91% (Italy).

3.1.1. Italy

The mean age of participants was 37.7 years ($SD = 14.7$); 43.2% were male. Three percent of the participants had an elementary school education, 8% had a junior high school, 41% a high school diploma, and 47% a college degree. The annual income mode was 'from 29,000 to 35,000 Euro' (48.8%).

3.1.2. Spain

Age $M = 31.9$ years ($SD = 13.3$); 38.7% male; 15% elementary school education, 44% junior high school, 33% high school, 8% college; annual income mode = '<5000 Euro' (38.1%).

3.1.3. Germany

Age $M = 39.3$ years ($SD = 17.0$); 49.0% male; 13% elementary school education, 50% junior high school, 20% high school, 17% college.

3.1.4. Greece

Age $M = 38.1$ years ($SD = 15.1$); 45.9% male; 2% elementary school education, 45% junior high school, 23% high school, 30% college; annual income mode = '5000–10,000 Euro' (25.9%).

3.1.5. Poland

Age $M = 35.1$ years ($SD = 12.2$); 43.2% male; 9% elementary school education, 9% junior high school, 45% high school, 37% college; annual income mode = '10,000–15,000 Euro' (30.5%).

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Personality traits

In Italy, Spain and Poland, we used a shortened version of the Big Five Questionnaire (BFQ). The native language version of the BFQ have been previously validated in Italy (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Borgogni, & Perugini, 1993) and Spain (Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Borgogni, 1995); in Poland the BFQ was translated and back-translated by native bilingual researchers. In Germany and Greece,

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