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# Personality and Individual Differences

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Short Communication

## Personality and politics<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between personality traits and political attitudes in a study of college-students ( $N = 1389$ ) and an MTurk sample ( $N = 281$ ) from America. The association between openness and political liberalism was replicated using two different measures of openness. Narcissism, extraversion, psychopathy, conscientiousness, and honesty were associated with political conservatism. Machiavellianism was associated with low rates of political liberalism. This study has the potential to inform the conversation about the utility of personality traits to understand political attitudes.

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### 1. Introduction

The examination and exploration of how personality traits relate to the political attitudes is a matter of debate. For some (Baker, 2005; Bishop, 2005) personality cannot predict political attitudes because political attitudes are unstable. For others (Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; Jost, West, & Gosling, 2009) political attitudes are themselves personality traits and, therefore, worthy of study in relation to taxonomies of personality. This study is designed to replicate and extend the former position in two important ways. First, most of what we know about the relationship between personality traits and political attitudes is confined to the Big Five (i.e., Openness, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism). However, the HEXACO model (i.e., the Big Five plus an Honesty/Humility dimension) might also be informative. Second, the Big Five are a rather socially desirable description of personality. Therefore, this study also extends what is known about the relationship between political attitudes and personality by examining its associations with the Dark Triad traits.

If political attitudes are stable one would expect there to be similar patterns in relation to personality traits within and between studies. Therefore, one important task here is to attempt to replicate prior findings with the Big Five traits and to show how those traits are not subject to methodological or sampling artefacts (Carney et al., 2008; Jost et al., 2009). Those who are more open to

experience and intellectual in nature may be more politically liberal. Conversely, individuals who are conscientious may have a more methodical and cautious approach to change. This should translate into conscientiousness being correlated with political conservatism. These relationships should be robust across different measures of the trait (i.e., the Big Five and the HEXACO).

In addition, it is worth expanding what is known about the links between politics and personality to examine some “darker” aspects of human nature. One advantage of the HEXACO over the traditional Big Five is that it incorporates at least one ostensible “dark” aspect of human nature by assessing individual differences in dishonesty (Ashton & Lee, 2007). Alternatively, three aspects of “darker” personality that have garnered significant interest lately (Jonason, Webster, Schmitt, Li, & Crysel, 2012) and are related to dishonesty (Jonason & McCain, 2012), that is the Dark Triad traits. The Dark Triad traits (Paulhus & Williams, 2002) are characterized by entitlement, superiority, dominance (i.e., narcissism), glib social charm, manipulateness (i.e., Machiavellianism), and callous social attitudes, impulsivity, and interpersonal antagonism (i.e., psychopathy). Prior research has reliably highlighted the “dark” side of these traits including limited empathy (Jonason, Lyons, Bethell, & Ross, 2013c), social dominance (Jones, 2013), heightened violence (Jones & Paulhus, 2010), and racism (Hodson, Hogg, & MacInnis, 2009; Jones, 2013). Political conservatives tend to adopt a “colder” and less sensitive approach to deal with others in as much as they are opposed to social welfare and other ventures to help the needy. Antisocial personality traits might be part of the correlates that enable this kind of political disposition.

This study replicates and extends what is known about the relationship between personality and political attitudes. It examines how the Big Five, the HEXACO, and the Dark Triad traits predict

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political attitudes. Given that the Big Five are correlated with the Dark Triad traits (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), and the HEXACO and the Dark Triad traits are also correlated (Jonason & McCain, 2012) and each personality taxonomy is not fully orthogonal within itself, it is essential to control for the shared variance among and between the traits. This study, therefore, simply reports results from two multiple regressions. This will allow for better precision in understanding the links between politics and personality.

## 2. Study 1

This study assesses the relationship between personality traits and self-reported liberalism-conservatism in a large cohort of university undergraduates. In this study what is known about the correlations between the Big Five traits and political attitudes is replicated. This study also extends what is known about the relationship between personality and political attitudes by incorporating the Dark Triad traits as well.

### 2.1. Method

#### 2.1.1. Participants and procedure

One thousand three hundred eighty-nine undergraduates (33% male), aged 18–50 years old ( $M = 18.88$ ,  $SD = 2.15$ ) from the University of Texas at Austin participated in an online study in their introductory psychology course. The majority (46%) of the sample was of European descent, with 6% of African descent, 23% of Hispanic/Latino descent, 14% of Asian descent, and the remainder reporting some “other” ethnic identity. Upon completion participants were thanked and debriefed.

#### 2.1.2. Measures

To measure the Dark Triad traits, the Dark Triad Dirty Dozen (Jonason & Webster, 2010) was used. Participants were asked how much they agreed (1 = *disagree strongly*; 5 = *agree strongly*) with statements such as: “I tend to want others to admire me” (i.e., narcissism), “I tend to lack remorse” (i.e., psychopathy), and “I have used deceit or lied to get my way” (i.e., Machiavellianism). Items were averaged together to create an index of narcissism (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .74$ ), Machiavellianism ( $\alpha = .70$ ), and psychopathy ( $\alpha = .71$ ).<sup>1</sup>

The Big Five Inventory (Benet-Martínez & John, 1998) was used to assess the Big Five traits. Participants were asked their agreement with 44 items (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). Five factors were created by averaging the respective items for Extraversion ( $\alpha = .88$ ), Neuroticism ( $\alpha = .82$ ), Openness ( $\alpha = .80$ ), Conscientiousness ( $\alpha = .81$ ), and Agreeableness ( $\alpha = .79$ ).

Political orientation was measured by asking people to self-identify (Jost et al., 2009). Four percent rated themselves as “extremely conservative”, 20% as “somewhat conservative”, 33% as “in the middle”, 28% as “somewhat liberal”, and 7% as “extremely liberal”, suggesting a rather normal distribution of self-identified political orientation where low scores are associated with extreme conservatism and high scores are associated with extreme liberalism. In total, we had a slightly left-leaning sample ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 0.97$ ; Range 1–5).

### 2.2. Results

Table 1 contains a summary of the results from a multiple regression that controls for the shared variance within the Big Five

**Table 1**

Multiple regression examining the associations between personality and political attitudes (Study 1).

	$\beta$	$t$
Extraversion	-.10	-3.16**
Agreeableness	-.03	-0.69
Conscientiousness	-.11	-3.35**
Neuroticism	.03	0.93
Openness	.22	7.63**
Machiavellianism	.01	0.36
Psychopathy	.08	2.07*
Narcissism	-.09	-2.73**

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

and the Dark Triad traits and between each personality typology. Political liberalism was correlated with extraversion, conscientiousness, and narcissism. Political conservatism was linked to lacking openness and psychopathy.

## 3. Study 2

Study 1 was limited in a number of ways. First, it relied on a contentious measure of the Dark Triad. Second, it relied solely on the Big Five model of personality when the HEXACO model might provide additional precision. Third, it was conducted using college students only who may not be all that particularly politically active. Fourth, it assumes that political attitudes are best characterized in a bipolar as opposed to two-dimensional way. Therefore, in order to address these, Study 2 was conducted.

### 3.1. Method

#### 3.1.1. Participants and procedure

The sample was composed of 281 American participants (36% male), aged 17–76 years old ( $M = 32.26$ ,  $SD = 11.70$ ), who were paid US\$1 for their completion of a series of measures on MTurk. Five percent self-identified as African American, 80% as European American, 9% as Asian American, and the remainder (6%) reported belonging to an “other” ethnic group. Upon completion participants were thanked and debriefed.

#### 3.1.2. Measures

The Short-Dark Triad (Jones & Paulhus, 2014) is a concise measure of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. It contains 27 items asking participants to rate their agreement (1 = *Strongly Disagree*; 5 = *Strongly Agree*) with statements reflecting narcissism (e.g., “I have been compared to famous people.”), Machiavellianism (e.g., “Most people can be manipulated.”), and psychopathy (e.g., “I like to get revenge on authorities.”). Items were summed to create indexes of Machiavellianism (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .81$ ), narcissism ( $\alpha = .80$ ), and psychopathy ( $\alpha = .82$ ).<sup>2</sup>

Individual differences in personality were assessed by the 60-item HEXACO-PI-R (Ashton & Lee, 2009).<sup>3</sup> Participants were asked their agreement (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with the statements. For instance, as an indicator of the Honesty/Humility factor, participants were asked to what extent they agreed with the item: “I’d be tempted to use counterfeit money if I were sure I could get away with it”. The corresponding items were averaged to

<sup>2</sup> Machiavellianism correlated with both psychopathy ( $r(279) = .58$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and narcissism ( $r(279) = .30$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and narcissism correlated with psychopathy ( $r(279) = .40$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

<sup>3</sup> Although it uses only 10 questions per subscale, it shows an almost identical factor structure to the full HEXACO scale with equivalent psychometric properties (Ashton & Lee, 2009).

<sup>1</sup> Machiavellianism correlated with psychopathy ( $r(1215) = .38$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and narcissism ( $r(1210) = .39$ ,  $p < .01$ ), and narcissism correlated with psychopathy ( $r(1211) = .13$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

create indexes of Honesty/Humility ( $\alpha = .78$ ), Emotionality ( $\alpha = .78$ ), Extraversion ( $\alpha = .85$ ), Conscientiousness ( $\alpha = .79$ ), Agreeableness ( $\alpha = .85$ ), and Openness ( $\alpha = .80$ ).

Individual differences in political orientation were assessed with six items where items assessing conservatism and liberalism were randomized within each classification and each classification was presented in a randomized order. Participants were asked how much they agreed (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*) with statements asking if they were politically, financially, and socially liberal/conservative. Items were summed to create indexes of liberalism ( $\alpha = .87$ ) and conservatism ( $\alpha = .85$ ).<sup>4</sup>

### 3.2. Results

Table 2 describes the results of two multiple regressions controlling for the shared variance within and between the HEXACO and the Dark Triad traits. Liberalism was linked to openness. Low rates of liberalism were linked to high rates of Machiavellianism. Conservatism was paradoxically linked to both honesty and psychopathy.

### 4. General discussion

If personality psychologists (Carney et al., 2008; Jost et al., 2009) are correct then there should be replicable associations between personality traits and political attitudes. These links should be robust across measures, studies, and samples. In this study, such evidence was provided by replicating the link between openness and political liberalism. The conservative nature of those high on conscientiousness was replicated in Study 1 but failed to replicate in Study 2. Nevertheless, being open and, perhaps lacking conscientiousness, may inform progressive movements for political change. Traits like intellectualism (i.e., openness) and rashness (i.e., lacking conscientiousness) may have been associated with progressive political movements spanning from (at least) the American Revolution to the hippie movement of 1960s America. This relationship for openness proved robust across two measures of this trait.

This study also extended what is known about the personality correlates of political attitudes by examining how “darker” aspects of personality might account for some unique variance in political leanings. Narcissism (Study 1) and psychopathy (Study 2) were linked to a political conservatism. Machiavellianism was associated with low rates of political liberalism, not political conservatism exactly (Study 2). It might be that political conservatism is informed by traits that predispose individuals to desire social dominance (Jones, 2013) and lack empathy (Jonason et al., 2013c). That said, in Study 1 psychopathy appeared to be related to liberalism instead of conservatism. Taking into account the size of the association, the sample size, and the correlation between dishonesty and psychopathy (Jonason & McCain, 2012)—which provides convergent evidence—it is probably safest to trust the results from Study 2. Results from Study 1 might be the result of correlated errors given the (overly) high powered test. It is also possible this is a hitherto unknown difference between the Dirty Dozen and Short D3 measures of the Dark Triad traits. More work is warranted.

One important addition is worth noting. In the past, political attitudes have been measured on a bipolar continuum (Carney et al., 2008; Jost et al., 2009). In Study 2, where this was not assumed, results suggest that political attitudes might not be so simple. The lack of replication of the same correlations across measures of liberalism and conservatism suggests that at least two dimensions might be required to more accurately understand

**Table 2**

Multiple regressions examining the associations between personality and political attitudes (Study 2).

	Liberalism		Conservatism	
	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
Honesty–Humility	-.14	-1.81	.17	2.10*
Emotionality	.02	0.38	.12	1.92
Extraversion	.04	0.45	-.06	-0.62
Agreeableness	-.10	-1.45	.04	0.55
Conscientiousness	-.11	-1.72	.10	1.50
Openness to experience	.28	4.84*	-.10	-1.73
Machiavellianism	-.17	-2.10*	.13	1.62
Narcissism	-.04	-0.47	.10	1.04
Psychopathy	-.17	-1.94	.21	2.33*

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

political attitudes in a psychometric way. These dimensions appear mildly orthogonal. For instance, Machiavellianism was correlated with low rates of political liberalism whereas psychopathy was correlated with political conservatism. Seeing that the two traits overlap to a large degree (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), this provides interesting insights to not only the potential multidimensionality of political attitudes but also distinguishes these two personality traits.

### 5. Limitations and conclusions

This study had a number of limitations. First, it relied on WEIRD samples (i.e., western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic; see Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) samples. However, nearly all research on the Dark Triad traits (but see Jonason, Li, & Czarna, 2013b) has been conducted using such samples, allowing the results to be framed in relation to those other studies. Second, one could criticize the measures used. While two different measures of the Dark Triad traits were used, both of these are too short to examine sub-factors within narcissism and psychopathy (Jonason, Jones, & Lyons, 2013a). Third, this was a rather atheoretical paper. The goal of which was merely to better understand the relationship between personality and politics. Despite these limitations, there are unique insights provided here in relation to using personality traits to understand individual differences in political attitudes.

The examination and exploration of how personality traits relate to the political attitudes is a matter of debate (Baker, 2005; Carney et al., 2008). By replicating and extending what is known about the relationships between personality traits and political attitudes, this study speaks to that debate. It suggests that personality traits can be informative in trying to understanding political attitudes.

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