



# Political participation, personality, and the conditional effect of campaign mobilization



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## ABSTRACT

Why are some people more responsive to campaign mobilization than others? I argue that the composition of a person's core personality makes some people more responsive to mobilization cues than others. However, the degree to which personality alters the effectiveness of mobilization also depends on the type of political participation for which people are being mobilized. I explore the determinants of political participation by looking at the interaction between the Big-5 traits of agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability and the intensity of campaign environments. This paper demonstrates that despite the possible ameliorative effect mobilization has on unequal patterns of political participation, an enduring source of participatory inequality may very well be rooted in a person's core psychological structure.

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Why do some people participate in politics, while others do not? Central to most explanations of political participation is the acknowledgment that participation in the political process is costly and not everyone participates equally (Verba et al., 1995; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Gimpel et al., 2007). Political participation requires time, money, cognitive energy, and civic skills. Some people are better equipped with these resources than others, either because they have more education or higher socio-economic status. For many, participatory inequalities threaten the health of American democracy by creating unequal influence in the political process (Lijphart, 1997). A possible panacea to these inequalities in political participation, however, is grassroots campaign mobilization. Indeed, many have suggested that the reason why some people do not participate in politics is simply because they have not been asked (Verba et al., 1995; Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993).

Political mobilization subsidizes the cost of political participation and often motivates people to overcome their rational incentive to not participate by connecting participation to “the social nature of political life” (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993, 23). Campaign mobilization can bring those who would otherwise sit on the political sidelines and transform them into political participants. While many have looked at the efficacy of mobilization efforts (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Gerber and Green, 2000;

Goldstein and Ridout, 2002), as well as competing mobilization strategies (Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1992; Holbrook and McClurg, 2005; Hillygus and Shields, 2008; Shaw, 2006), few have examined how well these mobilization efforts play across message recipients (See Gimpel et al., 2007 for a noteworthy exception).

In other words, even though a great deal of research has studied the *targets* of mobilization, few have looked at who are most *responsive* to mobilization efforts. This begs the question: Are some people more responsive than others? I argue that some people respond to campaign stimuli differently by virtue of core dispositional traits that express themselves through a person's personality. This paper investigates the conditional relationship between campaign mobilization and core dispositional traits on voter turnout and non-voting political participation. A flurry of recent research has shown that dispositional traits—namely, the Big-Five—are related to various forms of political participation (Mondak and Halperin, 2008; Mondak et al., 2010, 2011; Mondak, 2010; Vecchione and Caprara, 2009; Gerber et al., 2012, 2013). While these studies have shown that extraversion and openness to new experience consistently have a direct effect on political participation, the effect of others—namely, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability—have been inconsistent, yielding a puzzling array of contradictory statistical results.

I argue that one explanation for these inconsistencies is that the relationship between these traits and participation is often conditional on environmental context, and the effects of campaign competition play out differently across voters as a function of their

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personality traits. Some traits have uniform effects on political action: extraverts and those open to new experience engage in politics in both competitive and uncompetitive campaign environments. Other traits have conditional effects, where those high in agreeableness, conscientiousness and neuroticism participate more in contexts where campaign cues are prevalent. As such, I argue that in order to comprehend the drivers of human behavior, attention must be paid to three “broad classes of factors: those that are situational, those that are dispositional,” and the interaction between the two (Mondak et al., 2010, 1). In doing so, I connect personality to the intensity of campaign mobilization efforts. I argue that the composition of a person’s personality shapes the way one assesses the costs and benefits of participating in the political process. Lastly, unlike other studies that have looked at the moderating effect of personality on the relationship between campaign activity and voter turnout (Gerber et al., 2013), this paper examines both voting and non-voting participation.

This idea that personality produces heterogeneous payoffs for mobilization efforts has both practical and normative significance. In terms of campaign strategy and tactics, this paper demonstrates that campaign staff will get heterogeneous payoffs from campaign activity when it comes to various forms of political participation. Some people are responsive to mobilization than others. Normatively, these findings suggest that campaign competition and mobilization may not be the panacea to patterns of unequal political participation some have suggested (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Gimpel et al., 2007), and that an enduring source of participatory inequality may very well be rooted in a person’s core psychological structure.

## 1. Campaign effects and political mobilization

Every four years, intense presidential campaigns transform the American political landscape. For the average American in an intense campaign environment, it is difficult to avoid the television and radio ads, bumper stickers and yard signs, campaign mailers, and even direct contact from political parties and campaigns. These kinds of campaign environments force even the most infrequent observer of politics to be exposed to some level of political content and the social and affective cues embedded in it. In these intense environments, political mobilization efforts are redoubled, making direct campaign contact more likely (Wolak, 2006; Gimpel et al., 2007; Lipsitz, 2009). Potential voters are peppered with campaign activity either through exposure to campaign messages over the airwaves (Kahn and Kenny, 1999; Ansolabehere et al., 1994; Freedman and Goldstein, 1999; Jackson et al., 2009; Finkel and Geer, 1998) or via the ground campaigns, which are becoming increasingly important in presidential campaign strategies of both major parties (Gershtenson, 2003).

Extant research has long shown that mobilization through voter contact increases turnout and other forms of non-voting participation because personal contact is thought to be the most effective method for delivering messages tapping into the pro-social side of collective action and appeals to civic duty (Gerber and Green, 2000). The debate over campaign mobilization has largely hinged on who the targets of party contacting are rather than who among

those targeted is most responsive to it. Some past studies have found consistent evidence that party contacting is driven by strategies designed to turn out the most likely voters—i.e. active partisans (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1992; Holbrook and McClurg, 2005). Others, however, have found that swing voters and independents are primarily targeted (Hillygus and Shields, 2008; Shaw, 2006).<sup>1</sup>

Even though presidential elections have become increasingly competitive over the last several election cycles, less than half the country is actively exposed to the intense campaign environment created by presidential elections. Indeed, the structure of the Electoral College dictates that presidential candidates allocate their resources in only the most competitive states in the country during the campaign (Gimpel et al., 2007; Lipsitz, 2009; Bartels, 1985). The net result is that a few states capture the lion’s share of the campaign resources, while every other state is left virtually in the campaign dark. Campaign competition mobilizes voters and leads to surging turnout in battleground states (Lipsitz, 2009; see also Jackman, 1987; Franklin, 2004; Holbrook and McClurg, 2005; Blais, 2006), but not blackout states. This stark disparity between battleground states and spectator states (Lipsitz, 2009)—low intensity and high intensity campaign environments—creates a natural experiment for looking at the relationship personality has on political participation in different campaign contexts, and it provides an opportunity to examine how responsive different personality types are to campaign and mobilization tactics.

## 2. The big five and political participation

What is meant by core personality traits? The definition of personality adopted here is that it is biologically rooted and shapes human behavior (Mondak, 2010). This definition assumes that personality predates social and political influences (Gerber et al., 2010) and is made up of a group of core dispositional traits rooted in our biological structure and can predict an assortment of different political behaviors (Mondak and Halperin, 2008).

The reason for this interest in the Big Five is because they have a ‘dispositional signature’—that is, they are traits that are broad, non-conditional, and decontextualized. They embody broad dimensions of personality, each with their own sub-domains or facets that help determine behavior (DeYoung et al., 2007) and shape the overall orientation a person has toward the social world (McAdams and Pals, 2006). As a result, the Big Five are different from psychological elements that stem from a person’s personality, such as characteristic adaptations—e.g. values and attitudes—and self-concepts related to identity and self-esteem (Gerber et al., 2011, 266). Also due to this dispositional signature, personality psychologists have long argued that core personality traits have some basis in genetics and tend to be stable over time (Bloeser et al., 2015; McCrae and Costa, 1999; McAdams and Pals, 2006; Borghans et al., 2008; Costa and McCrae, 1988; DeYoung et al., 2010).

Extant research has shown that the Big Five have a direct effect on various forms of political participation (Mondak and Halperin, 2008; Mondak et al., 2010; Mondak, 2010; Vecchione and Caprara, 2009; Gerber et al., 2012). While these studies have shown that some Big Five traits have a direct and consistent effect on political participation, the effect of other traits have been wildly inconsistent, yielding a combination of significant and null results, as well as significant results where their relationship with participation goes in opposite directions. These contradictory findings are puzzling. If personality is supposed to be so influential in determining individual behavior (Winter, 2003; Sniderman, 1975; Goldberg, 1993; McCrae and Costa, 2003; Mondak, 2010; Gerber et al., 2011), then why do so many of the Big-Five predict political behavior so inconsistently? The answer may be that personality has

<sup>1</sup> While this debate over the targets of mobilization efforts speaks to the possible spurious relationship between partisan mobilization and voter turnout and participation, some have suggested that over the last couple election cycles, new technologies and organizational strategies have muted this debate over who are targeted by campaigns and their associated party organizations. Armed with computer databases with voter lists and residential data, modern campaign strategies are reaching beyond their traditional bases of support and adopting a more grassroots approach (Gimpel et al., 2007).

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