



Personality traits, political attitudes and vote choice: Evidence from the United States



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ABSTRACT

Past studies have documented the significant relationships between personality traits and voter turnout, but we know less about whether personality traits influence individual vote choices. This study examines whether such attitudinal factors as party identification, feeling thermometers toward the candidates, policy preferences and executive approval mediate the effects of personality traits on vote choice in the United States. Using data from ANES 2012, this study finds no direct relationship between personality traits and vote choice. More importantly, the results reveal that through previously mentioned attitudinal factors, higher levels of extraversion, conscientiousness and emotional stability indirectly decrease the probability of voting for Obama, whereas a higher level of openness to experience indirectly increases the probability of voting for Obama. Nevertheless, agreeableness only exerts an indirect, positive influence on vote choice via executive approval. Overall, this study provides insight into the relationship between personality traits and vote choice and makes up for the insufficiency in the study of personality and voting behavior.

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1. Introduction

The study on the Big Five personality traits has received much scholarly attention over the past decade. The Big Five personality traits are five broad dimensions of personality: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability (sometimes referred to by its inverse, neuroticism) and openness to experience (Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1993). In particular, extraversion is characterized by talkativeness, assertiveness and energy; agreeableness is characterized by good-naturedness, cooperativeness and trust; conscientiousness is characterized by orderliness, responsibility and dependability; emotional stability is characterized by a lack of negative emotions; and openness to experience is characterized by originality, curiosity and ingenuity (Gosling et al., 2003). Previous studies have revealed important impacts of the Big Five personality traits on various aspects of political attitudes and behavior (e.g., Gerber et al., 2010, 2011; Mondak and Halperin, 2008; Mondak et al., 2010; Mondak, 2010). In particular, several studies have documented that the Big Five personality traits have significant influence on voter turnout. For instance, Mattila et al. (2011) find that extraversion and agreeableness increase voter

participation; Gerber et al. (2011) demonstrate that individuals who score high on conscientiousness are less likely to vote; De Neve (2010) reports that emotional stability is associated with higher turnout; finally, openness to experience is not always a significant predictor of voter turnout, but when it is, it is consistently associated with higher turnout (De Neve, 2010; Mondak et al., 2010). Overall, it is evident that the Big Five personality traits play an important role in shaping individual turnout decisions.

In contrast with fruitful evidence on the effects of personality traits on voter turnout, scholars have paid much less attention to the relationship between the Big Five personality traits and individual vote choices. Even so, some studies suggest that personality traits should come into play in shaping citizens' vote choices. Caprara et al. (1999) investigate the impacts of the Big Five personality traits on vote choice between party coalitions in the 1994 Italian election. They find that agreeableness and openness to experience are the dominant personality characteristics to influence voting behavior. That is, individuals who score high on agreeableness and openness to experience are inclined to prefer the center-left coalition to the center-right coalition. Similarly, Barbaranelli et al. (2007) examine the effects of the Big Five personality traits on individual voting intentions in the United States presidential election of 2004. They reveal that citizens with higher

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levels of agreeableness and openness to experience tend to report their intention to vote for the Democratic presidential candidate (i.e., John Kerry), whereas higher levels of conscientiousness and emotional stability are predictive of intention to vote for the Republican presidential candidate (i.e., George W. Bush). Altogether, these studies clearly show that personality traits exert significant influence on individual vote choices.

As suggested by [Mondak et al. \(2010\)](#), personality traits might affect individual political engagement through their effects on other mediatory factors and by interaction with individual and contextual factors. Based on this idea, some studies have formulated the mediation hypothesis to reexamine the relationship between personality and political participation ([Blais and Labbé St-Vincent, 2011](#); [Gallego and Oberski, 2012](#); [Schoen and Steinbrecher, 2013](#)). [Schoen and Schumann \(2007\)](#) represent the only one study to demonstrate that the effects of personality traits on vote choice are mediated by traditional attitudinal factors, such as partisanship, ideology, postmaterialism, and policy preference, in Germany. So far there are no studies examining the mediating relationship between personality and vote choice in other countries. Therefore, this study attempts to develop the mediation argument linking personality to vote choice theoretically and test it empirically in the United States. This study argues that several attitudinal factors of vote choice can mediate the effects of personality traits on vote choice, including party identification, feeling thermometer, policy preference and executive approval.

In general, this study is expected to advance our understanding of the relationship between personality traits and vote choice and provide empirical evidence that attitudinal factors play a mediating role in the relationship between personality traits and vote choice, especially focusing on the 2012 United States presidential election.¹ This paper proceeds as follows. The next section outlines the theoretical framework for the mediating relationship between personality traits and vote choice, and proposes the hypotheses for each personality traits. The third section describes the data, measurement of variables and analytic method. The fourth section reports the empirical results for the mediation effects of personality traits on vote choice in the United States presidential election of 2012. The final section concludes by summarizing the key findings and discussing the implications of this study.

2. Personality traits and vote choice

A number of psychologists have agreed that the number and nature of human personality can be summarized by five major dimensions known as the Big Five – extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and openness to experience. Previous studies have provided a great deal of evidence that these five personality traits are strongly influenced by genetics ([Bouchard, 1994, 2004](#); [McGue et al., 1993](#)) and are highly stable through the life cycle ([Roberts and DelVecchio, 2000](#)). Therefore, psychologists often theorize that the Big Five personality traits are causally prior to any specific attitudes or behaviors ([Ha et al., 2013](#)). Since personality has to do with individual differences in behavioral patterns and cognitive processes, scholars have examined the role of personality in a wide range of attitudes and behaviors across a variety of domains.

[Mondak and Halperin \(2008\)](#) are the first to provide a clear theoretical framework for the relationship between personality and political behavior. First of all, they argue that extraversion should be positively associated with political participation because people who score high on this trait are assertive and sociable and thus are likely to engage in political participation. Second, there are two possibilities for the relationship between agreeableness on political participation. On the one hand, more agreeable people tend to

show high cooperative tendencies and hence are more likely to engage in group-based participation. On the other hand, since political participation often involves some level of disagreement, more agreeable people would abstain from participating in politics in order to avoid conflicts. Third, since more conscientious individuals are inclined to have high levels of civic duty and norm compliance, they are more likely to participate in political activities that adhere to social norms such as voting. Fourth, people with high levels of emotional stability tend to be quiet and have reliable presence in group settings, and thus they are more likely to participate in group-based political activities such as attendance at meetings. Finally, people who score high on openness to experience are prone to be interested in and attentive to political affairs and hence they are more willing to participate in politics. Since the seminal work of [Mondak and Halperin \(2008\)](#), numerous studies have provided empirical evidence to confirm the importance of the Big Five personality traits in individual political participation (e.g., [Anderson, 2009](#); [Gallego and Oberski, 2012](#); [Gerber et al., 2011](#); [Ha et al., 2013](#); [Mondak, 2010](#); [Mondak et al., 2010, 2011](#); [Vecchione and Caprara, 2009](#)). As a result, scholars have reached a widespread consensus that personality does affect individual political engagement.

With regard to the linkage between personality traits and political behavior, [Mondak et al. \(2010\)](#) suggest that personality might influence political participation through its impact on other intermediary factors and call attention to multiple possible pathways linking personality and political behavior. Accordingly, several studies have formulated the mediation hypothesis to look deeply into the relationship between personality and political participation. For instance, [Gallego and Oberski \(2012\)](#) reveal that the effects of personality traits on voter turnout and protest participation are mediated by attitudinal factors, such as civic duty, political interest, internal efficacy and political discussion. Similarly, [Schoen and Steinbrecher \(2013\)](#) find that party identification, civic duty, political interest and internal and external efficacy can mediate the impact of personality on voter turnout. To sum up, these studies clearly indicate the necessity to take indirect pathways into consideration to understand how personality traits influence individual political participation.

When it comes to the relationships between personality traits and voting behavior, recent analyses have demonstrated that the Big Five personality traits are significantly associated with individual electoral participation (e.g., [Anderson, 2009](#); [De Neve, 2010](#); [Gerber et al., 2011](#); [Mattila et al., 2011](#); [Mondak, 2010](#); [Mondak and Halperin, 2008](#); [Mondak et al., 2010](#)). In particular, most of them have focused on the relationship between personality traits and voter turnout and have found that attitudinal predictors can mediate the effects of personality traits on individual turnout decisions ([Gallego and Oberski, 2012](#); [Schoen and Steinbrecher, 2013](#)). By contrast, we have seen a very limited number of studies investigating whether personality traits exert significant influence on individual vote choices. In the American context, [Barbaranelli et al. \(2007\)](#) make the first and only attempt to examine the relationship between voters' personality traits and their vote choices in the United States presidential election. Based on their previous findings on significant associations between personality traits and political orientation in Italy that center-right voters score higher than center-left voters on extraversion and conscientiousness, but lower on agreeableness and openness to experience ([Caprara et al., 1999, 2002](#)), [Barbaranelli et al. \(2007\)](#) hypothesize that in the 2004 United States presidential election, voters with high levels of extraversion and conscientiousness are more likely to vote for Bush, whereas those with high levels of agreeableness and openness to experience are more likely to cast ballots for Kerry. Furthermore, they expect emotional stability to be an irrelevant personality

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