The power of the dark side: personality, the dark triad, and political ambition☆

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ABSTRACT

The goal of the current study was to assess the contribution of the HEXACO model of personality and of the Dark Triad in predicting nascent political ambition (i.e., the initial decision to run for elected office). The sample comprised 681 undergraduate students who completed both personality measures and four questions relating to political ambition online: a) thought about running for political office (vs. never thought about it); b) placing a career in politics in the top five of ten possible choices (yes vs. no); c) thinking one is at least somewhat qualified (vs. not at all qualified); and d) likelihood one would win an election (vs. unlikely). Overall, results indicated a distinct pattern where general personality traits such as extraversion and openness to experience consistently predicted the desire for a career in politics whereas the "darker" personality traits of Machiavellianism and narcissism consistently predicted perceived qualifications and success in a career in politics. Implications for research include the importance of considering both general and dark personality traits in the study of political behavior.

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1. Introduction

A vibrant and well functioning representative democracy requires thousands of ordinary citizens to routinely come forward and seek political candidacy. Recent studies of political ambition, however, reveal a relatively low baseline of ambition, with a majority of individuals having never considered a political career (Lawless & Fox, 2015). This emerging literature has begun to identify a number of factors related to political ambition. Pruysers and Blais (2016), for instance, demonstrate that negative stereotypes about their political ability can suppress political ambition among women. Lawless and Fox (2013) find that early socialization plays an important role in cultivating a sense of political ambition, and a number of studies have found that socio-demographics like age and gender are important predictors as well (e.g., Fox & Lawless, 2005; Lawless & Fox, 2005). One aspect that has been

neglected in the literature, however, is the relationship between personality and political ambition.

Personality refers to identifiable traits that are stable and enduring within any individual (Larsen & Buss, 2010). As individuals interact with their environment, personality traits can result in consistent and predictable outcomes (e.g., whether someone will engage in a conversation with a stranger; Larsen & Buss, 2010). Several well-validated models currently exist for organizing general personality traits into higher order, orthogonal dimensions, including the Five-Factor Model (FFM; Costa & McCrae, 1995; McCrae & John, 1992) and the HEXACO model (Ashton, Lee, & Goldberg, 2004). In addition to these general models of personality, scholars have also identified less desirable or more antagonistic personality traits. For example, the Dark Triad (Paulhus & Williams, 2002), consisting of Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy, has been studied extensively within the past decade as a predictor of negative outcomes (e.g., antisocial behavior; Furnham, Richards, & Paulhus, 2013).[1]

Research to date has found that general personality traits are related to such things as political ideology (e.g., Chirumbolo & Leone, 2010;

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[1] It should be noted that the individual components of the Dark Triad (e.g., grandiose narcissism, fearless dominance aspects of psychopathy) have also been associated with positive outcomes such as leadership skills and positive job performance (Lilienfeld et al., 2012; Watts et al., 2013).

Schoen & Schumann, 2007; Vecchione et al., 2011), vote choice (e.g., Barbaranelli, Caprara, Vecchione, & Fraley, 2007; Schoen & Schumann, 2007), and political participation (e.g., Vecchione & Caprara, 2009). Notably, only openness to experience appears to be consistently related to the above listed political outcomes while the results for the other personality traits differ between studies. Despite these mixed results, several studies have also demonstrated that personality is more important in the prediction of political ideology than demographic variables such as age, gender, education, and socioeconomic status (Barbaranelli et al., 2007; Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling, & Ha, 2010; Vecchione et al., 2011). While a number of studies have examined the personality profiles of American presidents and world leaders (Barber, 1992; George & George, 1964; Winter, 2003), elected officials (Costantini & Craik, 1980, 1972; Dietrich, Lasley, Mondak, Remmel, & Turner, 2012), and presidential candidates (Visser, Book, & Volk, 2017) no similar studies exist with regards to ordinary citizens.

Additionally, while the majority of studies to date have focused on the FFM, some scholars have argued that the addition of the honesty-humility factor of the HEXACO model might be particularly informative in the study of political behavior (Chirumbolo & Leone, 2010; Jonason, 2014). In fact, in a direct comparison of both the FFM and HEXACO model, Chirumbolo and Leone (2010) found that the HEXACO model was a better predictor of political ideology compared to the FFM. Jonason (2014) also reported significant associations between the honesty-humility factor and political ideology. Despite the significant associations identified in the literature, a number of studies have noted that personality cannot be said to *cause* political behavior (e.g., Verhulst, Eaves, & Hatemi, 2012). In fact, many argue that political behavior is likely the result of complex interactions between genetic (e.g., Fowler, Baker, & Dawes, 2008; see Charney and English, 2012 for a dissenting opinion) and psychosocial experiences of which personality is a part.

It is also interesting to consider associations between political ambition and more negative personality traits. For example, examinations of narcissism have identified that individuals high on this trait not only seek to be in leadership roles but are generally rated positively by others (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). Additionally, two studies of American presidents found elevated levels of grandiose narcissism (Watts et al., 2013) and fearless dominance (part of the psychopathy construct; Lilienfeld et al., 2012) compared to the general public. Finally, Machiavellianism has been associated with charismatic leadership among US presidents (Deluga, 2001), political skill (e.g., social astuteness and interpersonal influence; Kessler et al., 2010), and strategic manipulation rather than impulsivity (Jones & Paulhus, 2011). Taken together, these studies indicate that both the HEXACO model and the Dark Triad are important considerations when examining political behavior such as political ambition.

This study therefore adds to the current literature in two important ways: 1) by focusing on the contribution of the HEXACO model and Dark Triad traits, and 2) by examining the relationship between these personality traits and political ambition, a previously neglected outcome. While the literature is limited, consistent with Dietrich et al.'s (2012) study of US legislators, we expect that both extraversion and openness will be positively related to political ambition. Second, given a number of studies regarding the propensity for political leaders to exhibit the darker personality traits (e.g., Lilienfeld et al., 2012), we expect narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy to be associated with higher levels of political ambition.

2. Methods

2.1. Sample

Six hundred and eighty-one students from a Canadian university completed the survey online through the survey software Qualtrics. The majority of the sample comprised women (64.5%; 4 declined to answer), with a mean age of 21 years ($SD = 4.58$; 9 declined to answer).

The majority of the sample was also Caucasian (59.3%; 13 declined to answer). In order to be included within the analyses, participants required complete information on all scale and outcome measures resulting in varying sample sizes depending on the analysis being conducted.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. HEXACO-Personality Inventory (HEXACO-PI; Lee & Ashton, 2004)

The HEXACO-PI is a 192-item self-report scale that assesses the six factors of the HEXACO model of personality: honesty-humility (H), emotionality (E), extraversion (X), agreeableness (A), conscientiousness (C), and openness to experience (O). The reliability between self- and other-reported scores on the HEXACO-PI has been reported as high in Canadian (Lee & Ashton, 2006) and Dutch samples (de Vries, Ashton, & Lee, 2009). In the current sample, Cronbach's alpha coefficients were all within the acceptable range (range: 0.73 to 0.80).

2.2.2. The Dark Triad

Machiavellianism and narcissism were measured using the Short Dark Triad (SD3; Jones & Paulhus, 2014). The SD3 is a 27-item self-report measure assessing Machiavellianism, narcissism, and psychopathy. The SD3 has been cross-validated with community and student samples and has demonstrated good reliability (Jones & Paulhus, 2014). The internal consistency of both subscales used in the current analyses was acceptable (Cronbach's alpha; narcissism = 0.65; Machiavellianism = 0.84).

In order to reflect the four-factor model of psychopathy, the Self-Report Psychopathy scale (SRP:4; Paulhus, Neumann, Hare, Williams, & Hemphill, 2015) was used to assess psychopathy as opposed to using the psychopathy subscale of the SD3 (note that the total SRP:4 score showed good convergent validity with the SD3 psychopathy scale; $r = 0.81$, $p < 0.001$). The SRP:4 is a 64-item self-report measure of psychopathy developed based on the PCL-R (Hare, 2003). The four factors of the SRP:4 are: interpersonal (e.g., manipulative), affective (e.g., callousness), antisocial (e.g., criminal behavior), and lifestyle (e.g., impulsivity). The SRP has shown adequate convergent validity with other self-report measures of psychopathy (Neal & Sellbom, 2012; Williams, Paulhus, & Hare, 2007). Acceptable internal consistency was found in the current sample (Cronbach's alpha; range: 0.66 to 0.86). Descriptive statistics for all scales can be found in Table 1.

2.2.3. Political ambition

Political ambition was measured through a series of four questions designed to identify both a preference for a career in politics and an indication of efficacy in winning an election (questions were adapted from a separate study on political ambition among University students;

Table 1
Descriptive statistics for the HEXACO and the Dark Triad.

	M	SD	Range	Cronbach's alpha
Honesty-humility (H)	32.4	6.4	12–50	0.78
Emotionality (E)	32.8	6.6	13–50	0.80
Extraversion (X)	32.4	5.9	12–50	0.76
Agreeableness (A)	31.1	5.7	13–48	0.73
Conscientiousness (C)	34.4	6.0	17–50	0.80
Openness (O)	32.9	6.2	16–47	0.74
SD3: Machiavellianism	27.3	6.3	9–45	0.84
SD3: Narcissism	26.2	4.6	13–45	0.65
SRP: Interpersonal	40.6	10.1	16–71	0.86
SRP: Affective	41.3	7.2	24–66	0.66
SRP: Lifestyle	42.8	9.6	17–69	0.81
SRP: Antisocial	26.8	9.8	16–53	0.86

Note. Sample sizes range from 644 to 668. SD3 = Short Dark Triad (Jones & Paulhus, 2014); SRP = Self-Report Psychopathy Scale-Fourth Edition (Paulhus et al., 2015).