Short Communication

The personalities of politicians: A big five survey of American legislators

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ABSTRACT

This study uses the Big Five framework to investigate personality differences between politicians and the general public and between politicians themselves based on ideology and party identification. A 50-item Big Five questionnaire was taken by 2586 respondents at the Open Psychology data website and 278 American state legislators. The author finds that politicians are more Extraverted, Agreeable, Emotionally Stable, and Conscientious than the general public. At the same time, they are slightly lower on Intellect/Imagination. All results are statistically significant for all traits and both sexes, except with regards to females and Intellect. When comparing politicians to one another and controlling for demographic variables, Republicans score higher on Conscientiousness and lower on Intellect and Agreeableness. These findings hold for a smaller sample when ideology is the dependent variable, although only Intellect/Imagination reaches statistical significance. Conservative ideology is also associated with Emotional Stability. The results show important differences between politicians and the public, and reveal personality differences among elites that are in some ways analogous to the results we find in more representative samples.

1. Introduction

Scholars argue that the "Big Five" traits universally form the basis of personality (John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008; McCrae & Costa, 2008). In recent decades, political psychologists have naturally wondered whether these characteristics have political significance. Some analysts have tried to find connections between the Big Five traits and different forms of political participation such as voting and attending rallies (Caprara, Schwartz, Capanna, Vecchione, & Barbaranelli, 2006; Caprara, Vecchione, Capanna, & Mebane, 2009; Mondak, 2010; Mondak & Halperin, 2008; Mondak, Hibbing, Canache, Seligson, & Anderson, 2010).

When turning their attention to political opinions and party identification, scholars have made two broad findings that are applicable across different times and cultural contexts. First of all, conservatives tend to score higher on Conscientiousness. Openness to experience, sometimes called Intellect/Imagination, in contrast, is associated with liberalism (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling, & Ha, 2010; Mondak, 2010; Caprara & Vecchione, 2013). These relationships have been found not only in the United States, but also in European countries such as Germany (Riemann, Grubich, Hempel, Mergl, & Richter, 1993; Schoen & Schumann, 2007), Italy (Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Zimbardo, 1999; Caprara et al., 2006), Belgium and Poland (Van Hiel, Kossowska, & Mervielde, 2000).

Applying this framework to politicians, Best (2011) found that compared to the general population, German legislators scored higher on Extraversion and Openness, and lower on Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness. Regarding ideological self-placement, elites on the right scored higher on Conscientiousness and lower on the other four traits. Working in a different culture, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Consiglio, Picconi, and Zimbardo (2003); Caprara, Francescato, Mebane, Sorace, and Vecchione (2010) found that Italian politicians scored higher on Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Social Desirability, with female legislators being higher on Openness. Comparing politicians to one another, conservatives were found to be higher on Extraversion and Conscientiousness, but lower on Openness and Agreeableness. While in Italy both the left and the right-wing coalitions included parties with a wide variety of policy positions, variation in personality was still a strong predictor of how legislators sorted themselves.

In recent decades, only Dietrich, Lasley, Mondak, Remmel, and Turner (2012) have applied the Big Five framework to American legislators. They drew a sample of 94 lawmakers from three states and used a single question to measure each of the Big Five traits. While there were no statistically significant differences between Democrats and Republicans with regards to any trait except Conscientiousness, when ideological self-placement was the dependent variable, conservatives were more Conscientious and Emotionally Stable while being less Open and Agreeable. Unfortunately, in this study there was no sample drawn from the general population to compare legislators with.

Several clear patterns emerge. Unsurprisingly, legislators are more Extraverted than the general population. This is as would be expected,

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as politicians are not successful unless they can make others like and trust them. The findings on Agreeableness, Openness, and Conscientiousness are more mixed, although most of the research does indicate that politicians are relatively high on Emotional Stability. Comparing politicians to one another, those on the right are more Conscientious and Emotionally Stable, while their counterparts on the left tend to be more Open and Agreeable. No consistent patterns emerge regarding Extraversion. Until now there has yet to be a study that compares politicians to the general public in the United States.

2. Methods

E-mails were sent out to all US state legislators for whom addresses were found, which amounted to over 7000 e-mails. I also obtained a control group from the general population, in order to estimate differences between politicians and regular members of the public. Legislators were asked to click on a link to take a short survey. Those who chose to respond were directed towards a questionnaire that asked for their state, sex, age cohort, race, and political party.

This was followed by the administration of the 50-item Big Five survey, ten questions per trait, from the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) as described in Goldberg et al. (2006); Goldberg (1992) and constructed at the Open Psychology Data website. This same questionnaire has been taken by over 19,000 people online (Open Psychology Data; International Personality Item Pool; Goldberg, 1992, 1999; Goldberg et al., 2006) and gives us a population benchmark to which this study compares the responses of politicians. To correct for differences in culture and age, I limit the population sample to those taking the survey in the United States who are over 30 years old, which gives 2586 respondents, with an average age of 43.7 ($\sigma = 10.3$). The age restriction allows the population sample to more closely match the demographic profile of politicians, as all but seven of the legislators who responded were 30 years of age or older. Feeling that a measure of ideology would also be useful, during the study a second e-mail was sent out to the same legislators asking any new respondents to rate themselves on a scale of 1 to 5, from Very Liberal to Very Conservative. The entire sample size was 278 individuals, with 196 giving themselves an ideology rating.

In order to confirm the validity of the questionnaire constructed at the Open Psychology Data website, I checked to what extent the sample from the general population matches what we know about personality. Cross-cultural studies show that Emotional Stability, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness positively correlates with age, while Extraversion and Openness stay relatively constant (Soto, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2011). Also, women tend to score lower on Emotional Stability, and higher on Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness (Schmitt et al., 2008). All of these patterns hold in the population dataset obtained, indicating that it can be trusted as a rough sample of the general population. Both the population sample (Cochran's alpha = 0.90) and the politician data (Cochran's alpha = 0.88) show a high degree of reliability.

2.1. Response rate and issues of selection

The response rate among politicians was about 4%. This raises the issue of whether the results reported might be tainted by some sort of selection effect. There are two reasons why this is unlikely to be the case. First, one could imagine that those who were willing to complete the survey did not systematically differ from other legislators. On the day that the e-mail was sent out, those who answered may have happened to be individuals who, by chance, were in a better mood or less busy. The idea that workload determined response rates is supported by the finding that there is a strong inverse relationship between the natural log of state population size and the response rate from that state ($r = -0.68$).

Second, there may be differences between responders and non-responders, but the relevant characteristics may have little or no

correlation with Big Five traits. Supporting this view is that in terms of demographics and party affiliation the sample is quite similar to the profile of all state legislators. For example, women are slightly less than a quarter of lawmakers nationwide and 30% of the sample here. Republicans are 55% of state legislators, and made up 48% of those who responded. This indicates that any selection effects were not very strong. The summary statistics are shown below.

Finally, it is important to note that whatever traits caused certain people to answer the survey should have exerted the same effect on politicians of different parties and ideologies. It is unlikely that, for example, higher Conscientiousness makes Republicans less likely to fill out a questionnaire and Democrats more likely, or vice versa. If a selection bias makes politicians responding to this survey more alike, then any findings relating to differences based on partisan identification and ideology are *more* reliable than they otherwise would be.

3. Results

3.1. Politicians and the public

Fig. 1 allows us to visualize how male and female politicians compare to the more representative sample in terms of standardized scores, with the bracket ends representing the cut-offs for the 95% confidence intervals. Standardization is based on the averages of the means and the standard deviations of the male sample and the female sample in the public data.

3.2. Differences among politicians

Below, Table 2 shows the results of two OLS regressions. In the first model, political party is the dependent variable. It was coded as 1 if Republican, 0 otherwise. Of the three individuals that did not belong to either of the two parties, the first one was dropped and the other two were grouped in with the Democrats because they identified as liberal. In the second model, the dependent variable is ideology, on a 5-point scale from Very Liberal to Very Conservative (See Table 1). The independent variables in both models are standardized.

Controls were added to account for the demographic variables of age, gender, and race. The coefficient for each variable represents its effect when holding all other personality and demographic factors constant. Huber-White standard errors are in parentheses.

4. Discussion

Politicians score lower on Intellect than members of the general public, with the results being more pronounced among men. This
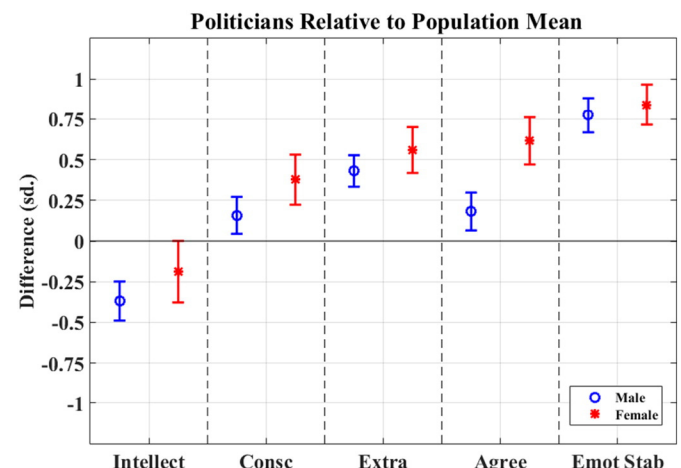
Fig. 1. Politicians relative to population mean.