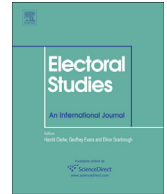




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## Gender differences in the effects of personality traits on voter turnout



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### ABSTRACT

This study examines whether the Big Five personality traits have different effects on male and female turnout. Previous research has reported an association between personality traits and turnout, but their results have been inconsistent. Nevertheless, there is a solid evidence of gender differences in personality traits and past studies have not taken into consideration the option that personality–turnout relationship might be gender-differentiated. The current study empirically finds that conscientiousness and emotional stability can significantly increase female turnout, but have no effect on male turnout. Furthermore, openness to experience exerts opposite effects on male and female turnout. As openness to experience increases, men become more likely to vote, whereas women become less likely to cast their ballots. However, extraversion and agreeableness are not associated with turnout, regardless of gender. To sum up, this study provides robust evidence that the effects of personality traits on turnout vary by gender and suggests that any future study of the topic must include interaction between gender and personality in order to estimate the effect of personality on turnout in a more accurate manner.

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### 1. Introduction

Gender inequalities in political participation remain an important issue for democracy. Previous studies have demonstrated that men are significantly more engaged than women in a number of political activities such as strikes, demonstrations, contacting political officials, and political party membership (Coffé and Bolzendahl, 2010; Inglehart and Norris, 2003; Marien et al., 2010). Nonetheless, some studies have found that gender differences in one of the most important forms of political participation – voting – are shrinking to the point of insignificance, and in some countries, even reversing (Coffé and Bolzendahl, 2010; Uhlaner, 1989; Verba et al., 1997). For instance, in the United States, it is found that women have voted at higher rates than men in every election since 1980, with

the gap between women and men growing slightly larger with each successive election.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars have proposed different theoretical perspectives to explain gender differences in political engagement. One theoretical perspective emphasizes differences in the political socialization of men and women, which are seen as shaping their public activities (including voting). A second set of theories links the growing autonomy of female voters to changing marital patterns and rising divorce rates. A third perspective gives primacy to rising levels of feminist consciousness among women since the 1960s. The fourth theory points to the importance of the increasing participation of women in the labor force as a factor influencing women's political orientations (Manza and Brooks, 1998).

While these above mentioned theories mostly focus on social and cultural explanations of gender differences in

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<sup>1</sup> More information can be found at the website of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University: <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/research/topics/documents/genderdiff.pdf>.

**Table 1**  
Gender differences in the Big Five personality traits in previous studies.

| Study                       | Data   | Measure of personality  | Findings  |
|-----------------------------|--|---|---|
| Budaev (1999)               | Three college student surveys in the United States and Canada                  | Five-factor model with 320 items (Jackson Personality Inventory) and with 352 items (Personality Research Form) | Women are more agreeable and less emotionally stable than men   |
| Costa et al. (2001)         | Secondary analyses of Revised NEO Personality Inventory data from 26 countries | Five-factor model with 240 items (Revised NEO Personality Inventory)  | Women score higher on agreeableness and openness to experience, but lower on emotional stability  |
| Fernández and Castro (2004) | College student survey in Spain  | Five-factor model with 44 items (Big Five Inventory)  | Women have significantly higher scores on extraversion and conscientiousness but lower scores on emotional stability than men   |
| Chapman et al. (2007)       | Older adult (age 65 or older) survey in the United States                      | Five-factor model with 60 items ( <i>NEO-Five Factor Inventory</i> )  | Older women have higher levels of agreeableness and lower levels of emotional stability than older men  |
| Schmitt et al. (2008)       | International Sexuality Description Project in 55 countries                    | Five-factor model with 44 items (Big Five Inventory)  | Women have higher levels of extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, and lower levels of emotional stability than do men across most nations<br>In terms of openness to experience, in 37 cultures, men score higher than women, whereas in 18 cultures, women have higher levels of openness to experience than men |
| Weisberg et al. (2011)      | Three surveys in the United States and Canada                                  | Five-factor model with 100 items (Big Five Aspect Scales)   | Women report higher extraversion and agreeableness scores, but lower emotional stability scores than men  |

political participation, in recent years, various studies have revealed important impacts of personality traits on various aspects of political behavior, as measured by the Big Five model (e.g., Gerber et al., 2011a; Mondak and Halperin, 2008; Mondak et al., 2010, 2011; Mondak, 2010). However, all these studies seem to assume that personality traits have the same impacts on political participation among women and men. In view of gender differences in personality, this study argues that the effects of the Big Five personality traits on individual political behavior can vary by gender, specifically focusing on the relationships between the Big Five personality traits and voter turnout.

In general, this study is expected to make the following contributions: (1) Propose a new theoretical perspective – personal traits – to explain gender differences in voter turnout; (2) Provide empirical evidence for the different effects of personality traits on male and female turnout; and (3) Offer an accurate connection between personality traits and political participation. This study is structured as follows. I begin by discussing gender differences in personality traits and why such differences might have different effects on voter turnout for men and women. Then, I describe the data and measurement of variables for my empirical test, and report the empirical findings on how in the Big Five personality traits exert different effects on male and female turnout. Lastly, I conclude by summarizing the key findings and discussing the implications of this study.

## 2. Gender differences in personality traits and their effects on turnout

Personality traits can be conceptualized as a set of stable individual differences in people's motivational reactions to circumscribed classes of environment stimuli (Denissen and Penke, 2008). These traits are endogenous dispositions that affect individual patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviors

(McCrae and Costa, 1996). With regard to the number and nature of personality traits, psychologists agree that human personality can be boiled down to five broad dimensions of personality known as the Big Five: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability (sometimes referred to by its inverse, neuroticism) and openness to experience (also called intellect or culture) (Costa and McCrae, 1992; Digman, 1990; John, 1990; Goldberg, 1993). By definition, John and Srivastava (1999) describe that extraversion is associated with sociability, activity, assertiveness and positive emotionality; agreeableness is in turn characterized by trust, altruism, tender-mindedness, modesty, and other prosocial behaviors; conscientiousness is related to tendency to think before acting, delaying gratification, following norms and rules, and planning, organizing, and prioritizing tasks; emotional stability is connected to anxiety, excitability, impulse control, instability and negativity; finally, openness to experience is associated with creativity, curiosity, imagination and nonconformity, self-efficacy, and high-risk health behaviors. Borghans et al. (2008: 983) summarize that extraversion refers to the degree to which a person needed attention and social interaction; agreeableness denotes the degree to which a person needed pleasant and harmonious relations with others; conscientiousness indicates the degree to which a person was willing to comply with conventional rules, norms and standards; emotional stability expresses the degree to which a person experienced the world as threatening and beyond his/her control; lastly, openness to experience denotes the degree to which a person needs intellectual stimulation, change and variety. Also, studies have demonstrated that these personality traits are strongly influenced by genetics (Bouchard, 1994, 2004; Eysenck, 1960; McGue et al., 1993) and are highly stable through the life cycle (Roberts and DelVecchio, 2000). Moreover, personality development is a lifelong process and both

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