



Personality and political orientation: Meta-analysis and test of a Threat-Constraint Model

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ABSTRACT

We synthesized and meta-analyzed 73 studies ($N = 71,895$) examining the associations between Big-Five personality and single-item self-placement measures of political orientation. Openness to Experience ($r = -.18$) and Conscientiousness ($r = .10$) were significantly but weakly correlated with political conservatism. The weak Openness-political orientation link was moderated by systemic threat and uncertainty (indexed by nation-wide homicide and unemployment). We propose a Threat-Constraint Model explaining this previously undetected Person \times Situation interaction. The model shows that there was a moderately-sized negative correlation between Openness and political conservatism when systemic threat was low ($r = -.422$) but that this association was negligible at only moderate levels of threat ($r = -.066$). These findings highlight the economic and societal constraints of personality-political ideology associations.

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"[T]he various qualities of men are clearly the reason why there are various kinds of states and many forms of government; for different men... make for themselves different... forms of government." – Aristotle (350 B.C./1988, p. 167, emphasis added)

1. Introduction

The idea that personality is associated with political worldviews has a long tradition in Western thought. Indeed, Aristotle (350 B.C./1988) argued that individual differences drive people to establish different governments. Though the extent to which scholars endorse this view has varied over the centuries, it was not until the mid-to-late-1930s that the personality correlates of political ideology became fertile ground for empirical study (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950/1964; Fromm, 1941; Maslow, 1943; Reich, 1933/1970).

The first decade of the 21st century witnessed an explosion of interest in the relationship between personality and political orientation. This renewed attention was stimulated—at least in part—by Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway's (2003) meta-analysis on the personality correlates of political conservatism. Jost et al. (2003) argued that political conservatism consists of the following two related—though conceptually-distinct—factors:

(a) opposition to change and (b) acceptance of inequality. In their own words, Jost et al. (2003, p. 369) defined political conservatism as:

"an ideological belief system that is significantly (but not completely) related to motivational concerns having to do with the psychological management of uncertainty and fear. Specifically, the avoidance of uncertainty (and the striving for certainty) may be particularly tied to one core dimension of conservative thought, resistance to change (Wilson, 1973). Similarly, concerns with fear and threat may be linked to the second core dimension of conservatism, endorsement of inequality (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999)."

Jost and colleagues (2003) thus argued that political conservatism reflects a belief system that reduces uncertainty, opposes change, and legitimizes the status quo. They further posited that political ideology is a form of motivated social cognition, and that people express the liberal versus conservative attitudes which meet their epistemic, existential, and ideological needs. Individual differences in these needs (i.e., personality differences) should therefore affect the extent to which conservative beliefs resonate with people.

Consistent with this position, Jost et al. (2003) provided evidence showing that political conservatism was associated with a host of social-cognitive motives. Averaging across 88 samples, multiple personality-based epistemic motives including Dogmatism, Need for Cognitive Closure, and Openness to Experience were consistently associated with political orientation. Similarly, existentially-based needs such as threat sensitivity, fear of death, and the presence of a social crisis were positively correlated with

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political conservatism. Finally, various ideological motives (e.g., Social Dominance Orientation and Right-Wing Authoritarianism) were also associated with political orientation.

2. Big-Five personality

Jost et al. (2003) provide a much needed framework for understanding the relationship between personality and political orientation. It is important to keep in mind, however, that their meta-analysis examined personality measures of varying bandwidths. That is, some of their measures assessed particularly narrow facets of personality (e.g., Dogmatism), whereas others captured relatively broad dimensions that subsume these narrower traits (e.g., Openness to Experience). This leaves one wondering whether the core dimensions of personality are reliably associated with political orientation, and just how substantive such effects might be.

Research on the Big-Five provides an important starting point for addressing this question. Big-Five theorists (e.g., Costa & McCrae, 1988; DeYoung, Quilty, & Peterson, 2007; Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1997; McCrae & John, 1992) argue that traits are organized into the following five core dimensions (each of which contain two specific facets): Extraversion (enthusiasm and assertiveness), Agreeableness (politeness and compassion), Conscientiousness (industriousness and orderliness), Neuroticism (volatility and withdrawal) and Openness to Experience (intellect and openness).

Studies consistently support the five factor model of personality. The Big-Five emerges across a variety of methodologies including (a) psycho-lexical analyses of trait descriptors (Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1990), (b) self-report surveys (McCrae & Costa, 1997), and (c) peer-ratings (McCrae & Costa, 1987). Likewise, the Big-Five is robust to different factor extraction methods (Goldberg, 1990) and shows remarkable within-person stability over time (Costa & McCrae, 1991; Soldz & Vaillant, 1999). Moreover, five personality factors appear across many cultures, suggesting that the Big-Five is (relatively) universal (McCrae & Costa, 1997; McCrae et al., 2000). Research even shows that each Big-Five factor is partly heritable (Jang, Livesley, Angleitner, Reimann, & Vernon, 2002; Jang, Livesley, & Vernon, 1996).

Two of the Big-Five factors have been repeatedly linked with values associated with political attitudes. First, people's interest in—and appreciation of—novelty (i.e., Openness to Experience) seems to relate to their support for cultural diversity. Likewise, a strong preference for organization (i.e., Conscientiousness) seems to cross-over into people's attitudes toward maintaining the status quo. Consistent with this view, Roccas, Sagiv, Schwartz, and Knafo (2002) examined the correlations between each of the Big-Five personality dimensions and 10 core values identified by Schwartz (1992). Of particular interest for our purposes, the authors found that Conscientiousness was positively correlated with valuing conformity and security. In contrast, Openness to Experience was negatively correlated with valuing traditionalism, but positively correlated with universalism. Notably, these values correspond to the two central components of conservatism (opposition to change and acceptance of inequality) identified by Jost et al. (2003). Indeed, Roccas and colleagues noted that Openness to Experience "...is antithetical to values that emphasize maintaining the status quo" (p. 796).

Other work demonstrates that only two dimensions of the Big-Five—namely, Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience—are consistently correlated with political orientation. In six separate samples, Carney, Jost, Gosling, and Potter (2008a, 2008b) showed that both (a) low Openness to Experience and (b) high Conscientiousness were associated with participants' self-reported political

conservatism. Even more striking, behavioral indices of Openness to Experience and Conscientiousness—as measured by third-party ratings of participants' (a) interpersonal behavior (Study 2) and (b) living spaces (Study 3)—predicted participants' level of conservatism. Studies outside of North America also show that Openness to Experience is negatively correlated (Van Hiel, Kossowska, & Mervielde, 2000; van Hiel & Mervielde, 2004), whereas Conscientiousness is positively correlated (Hirsh, DeYoung, Xu, & Peterson, 2010), with political conservatism.

Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience have been shown to correlate with political orientation at the macro level of analysis. Across three separate presidential elections, Rentfrow, Jost, Gosling, and Potter (2009) demonstrated that State-wide averages of Conscientiousness were *negatively* correlated with the percentage of votes captured by Democratic presidential candidates. State-wide levels of Openness to Experience, in contrast, were *positively* correlated with the percentage of votes gained by Democratic presidential candidates over the same period. Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience are robust predictors of political worldviews.

3. Malleability of the personality-conservatism link: a Threat-Constraint Model (TCM)

Though it is clear that some broad bandwidth measures of personality consistently predict political orientation, there is reason to believe that this relationship will be moderated by the situation. Nail and McGregor (2009) showed that both conservatives and liberals became more conservative in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks on the United States (also see Bonanno & Jost, 2006). Other research shows similar conservative shifts following increases in economic threat (Sales, 1973; Thórisdóttir & Jost, 2011), and social threat (McCann, 1997). These findings corroborate Jost et al.'s (2003) thesis that political conservatism is a motivated form of social cognition that helps people cope with uncertainty.

The malleability of political conservatism has important implications for our understanding of the relationship between personality and political orientation. Personality variables—particularly those of the broad bandwidth nature—are chiefly conceptualized as trans-situational predictors of behavior (Ozer & Benet-Martinez, 2006). Because situational threats affect the extent to which people endorse politically conservative worldviews, these threats will likely attenuate—or constrain—the relationship between personality and political orientation. We refer to this hypothesis as the Threat-Constraint Model (TCM) of political conservatism.

We posit that the relationship between Openness to Experience and political orientation will be attenuated by situational threat. Duckitt and Sibley (2009, 2010) argued that a low level of Openness to Experience causes people to view the social world as dangerous and threatening. Thus, because threats in the environment directly challenge the safe world view of those high in Openness, situational threats should attenuate the relationship between Openness to Experience and political conservatism. That is, situational threats directly challenge the beliefs of those who are high on Openness to Experience, whereas they merely confirm the worldviews of people who are low on Openness to Experience. This should result in larger conservative shifts among liberals (relative to conservatives) under threatening situations, thereby attenuating the relationship between Openness to Experience and political conservatism.

4. Overview of the current study

A considerable amount of research has examined the relationship between personality and political orientation since the publication of Jost et al.'s (2003) influential meta-analysis. An initial goal

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