The interrelation of personality traits, political attitudes and political behavior: empirical findings.

Martina Zandonella\textsuperscript{1} and Eva Zeglovits\textsuperscript{2}


Abstract

Personality counts for individual differences and allows quite consistent behavior over situation and context, while at the same time this behavior is not independent of the actual social setting (Ross and Nisbett 1991). Especially in the political context, the extent to what political structures and actions are shaped and channeled by people’s personalities has so far been a neglected question (Winter 2003a, 110). This paper wants to contribute to this striking issue by empirically analyzing the effects of personality on political behavior, namely turnout and right-wing voting. Our findings are based on a survey among Viennese voters, conducted during the run-up to the upcoming regional elections. The results show that personality actually contributes to explain prospective turnout, mainly through indirect effects via political self-efficacy. Our findings concerning the explanation of right-wing voting are quite convincing and match previous research on ideology and prejudice. Thus right-wing voting can be explained through personality, ideological beliefs and outgroup attitudes.

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\textsuperscript{1} PhD Student (Psychology) at the University of Vienna, working at SORA Institute for Social Research and Analysis, Vienna - correspondence to: mz@sora.at
\textsuperscript{2} PhD Student (Political Science) at the University of Vienna, working at SORA Institute for Social Research and Analysis, Vienna – correspondence to: ez@sora.at
1. Introduction

In order to understand complex behavior patterns like voting, dispositional, situational and systemic factors must be taken into account. While disposition contains every person’s unique genetic, biological, physical and psychological constitution, situation stands for the behavioral context that gives meaning to the actor’s roles, especially through its normative function. These situational conditions are formed by social systems including institutions and organizations, that primarily determine expectations for approved behavior (Zimbardo 2007, 445). Additionally each of these three levels contains its own processes and properties and together they add up to more than the sum their parts. Thus, when it comes to behavior explanation, all of them must be considered because explanations on only one level tell no more than an incomplete story (Pratkanis 2007, 8). Therefore, although this paper clearly focuses on the extent political behavior is shaped and channeled by people’s personalities, crucial situational and systemic factors are included as well. After a short review of the theoretical framework of our research, we continue with the empirical background of our study, then review our so-far results and finally finish with discussing them.

2. Theoretical Framework: The importance of personality for political behavior

Carver and Scheier (2000, 5) offer a definition of personality as ‘a dynamic organization, inside the person, of psychophysical systems that create a person’s characteristic patterns of behavior, thoughts, and feelings’. They furthermore propose that personality ‘conveys a sense of consistency, internal causality, and personal distinctiveness’ (Carver and Scheier 2000, 5). Hence personality counts for individual differences and allows consistent behavior over time and situations.

Concerning the specification and measurement of personality, some consensus has gathered around the notion that there are five personality factors (Winter 2003a, 117), often called the Big Five, which include neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness (Costa and MacCrae 1985). Within five-factor theory of personality (McCrae and Costa 1999) the Big Five as well as the specific traits that describe them constitute biologically based basic tendencies. These basic tendencies have to be distinguished from culturally conditioned characteristic adaptations, which for example include personal strivings, skills, habits, attitudes and the important subcategory of self concept. As Figure 1 shows there is no direct connection between external influences and basic tendencies because five-factor
theory ‘deliberately asserts that personality traits are endogenous dispositions, influenced not at all by the environment’ (McCrae, Costa et al. 2000, 175). Environmental influences nevertheless play an important role concerning the functioning of the personality system. They mainly define the conditions under which human personality evolve, they shape skills, values, attitudes, identities, and they provide concrete forms in which personality traits are expressed (McCrae, Costa et al. 2000).

Figure 1: A model of the personality system according to five-factor theory (McCrae, Costa et al. 2000, 174)

In the political context individual personalities are especially important when the actor occupies a strategic location, when the situation is ambiguous, unstable, complex, or laden with symbolic and emotional significance, and when spontaneous or effortful behavior is required (Greenstein 1987, ch. 2). More recently Byman and Pollak (2001, 109) argue that political actors’ personalities become significant when power is concentrated, when institutions are in conflict, or during times of great change.

While a considerable number of studies has been conducted concerning various aspects of politician’s personalities on policy outcomes (see Winter 2003b for a review), empirical findings about the relationship between the personalities of voters and their political behavior (particularly turnout) are rare. For Austria there are no results so far, but Rammstedt (2007) was able to show for Germany that variance
explanation of turnout rises, when the personality dimension of extraversion is added to a model with socio-demographic variables as independents.

When studying personality in the political context, existing research recommends to additionally considering three specific constructs of individual differences, namely right-wing authoritarianism (RWA), social dominance orientation (SDO) and self-efficacy, because of their mediating effects between single personality dimensions and political attitudes as well as political behavior (Campbell, Converse et al. 1960; Pratto, Sidanius et al. 1994; Altemeyer 1998; Duckitt 2005; Sibley and Duckitt 2008).

Right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) is a one-dimensional construct that includes conservatism, authoritarian aggression and authoritarian submission, which are three out of Adorno et al.’s (1950) original nine facets of authoritarianism (Altemeyer 1998). Social dominance orientation (SDO) in turn represents a ‘general attitudinal orientation toward intergroup relations, reflecting whether one generally prefers such relations to be equal, versus hierarchical’ (Pratto, Sidanius et al. 1994, 742). Both RWA and SDO powerfully predict quite similar political, social, ideological and intergroup phenomena like generalized prejudice toward outgroups and ethnocentrism (Pratto, Sidanius et al. 1994; Altemeyer 1998). Moreover and because these two constructs are not significantly or only weakly correlated, they predict these phenomena quite independently of each other (Duckitt 2000).

Further research was additionally able to link RWA and SDO to distinct social worldviews, motivational goals and values, and underlying personality traits. Therefore RWA is strongly associated with viewing the social world as a threatening place, while SDO is linked with a different view about the social world as a competitive jungle (Duckitt 2001). Concerning motives and values Duckitt (2005, 404) concludes that people high on RWA value security, order, and control, whereas people high on SDO value power, dominance, and group enhancement. Finally Altemeyer (2006) and Jost et al. (2003) found with respect to personality traits, that high RWAs are self-righteous, conscientious, agreeable and low on openness. They furthermore show low intolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty, but high needs for order, structure and closure. High SDO on the other side is associated with low empathy, low cooperation, low agreeableness and low sympathy (Altemeyer 1998; Heaven and Bucci 2001).

Since Angus Campbell’s work the importance of the sense of political self-efficacy for explaining voting behavior has been undoubted: ‘The rate of voting turnout was found to increase uniformly with the strength of the individuals’ sense of political efficacy’
Political self-efficacy, according to that conception is ‘the feeling that individual political action does have, or can have, an impact upon the political process’ (Campbell, Gurin et al. 1954, 187). Caprara (2009) gives an overview of the numerous studies that show the impact of political self-efficacy on political participation and civic engagement. As political self-efficacy also correlates with the Big Five, in particular with openness, extraversion and neuroticism (Huber and Rattinger 2005), it can be considered to have mediating effects between personality and turnout as well.

3. Empirical Framework

3.1 The current run-up to the regional elections in Vienna as setting for studying individual personalities’ impact on political behavior

Austria is a federal state with nine regional sub-entities, each of them electing their own regional parliaments. Within this system Vienna is a special case because it is a region as well as a city and therefore the city mayor is governor of region at the same time. Regional elections in Vienna take place in a five-year period and the next ones will be held in October 2010.

The surroundings of this election can be expected to fulfill numerous of those conditions that research proved to be important for personalities’ influence on political behavior (see Chapter 2). First of all political power is currently concentrated within the absolute majority of the Social Democratic Party. Social Democratic Party has in every free election been strongest party in Vienna since 1919 and has almost ever governed with absolute majority (there were no free elections between 1934 and 1945). Political power therefore has been highly concentrated in Vienna for many decades now. But as Social Democratic Parties all over Austria are confronted with an exceptional loss of voters, the Viennese Social Democrats have to deal with anticipated defeat.

Secondly, the far right-wing Freedom Party (FPOE) will once again push the issue of migration in their already well-known style based on ingroup-outgroup defining symbols and the central emotion of fear. Already Joerg Haider, former political leader of the Freedom Party, positioned the party as anti-establishment and ideologically followed a catch-all-losers strategy, combining a number of seemingly unrelated or even contradicting right-wing populist issues: market liberalism, law-and-order politics, anti-internationalism and anti-migration issues with strong stereotypic and xenophobic language (Frölich-Steffen 2004; Heinisch 2004). In their election campaigns FPOE
uses its usually successful ingroup-outgroup polarization, including ‘us’ (the Austrians, the Christians, the ‘little man’) against the ‘others’ (migrants, asylum seekers, Muslims, ‘those above’). FPOE therefore uses several of the overall strategies of right-wing populist parties in western Europe described by van Dijk (1997), including positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation.

Concerning the 2010 Vienna regional elections, political observers expect a match between SPOE with governing major Michael Häupl and FPOE with self-announced opponent H.C. Strache. As FPOE had a rather bad result facing difficult conditions in 2005, it seems very likely that they will gain considerable votes in 2010.

3.2 Data and Research Questions

In this political context we studied the impact of individual personalities on turnout and right-wing voting within a broader research question concerning xenophobia. We therefore conducted a telephone survey among 1,200 Viennese voters, including political, anti-migrant, anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim and general xenophobic attitudes, RWA, SDO, political self-efficacy, items concerning personality factors, and questions about political behaviors.

To measure RWA and SDO we used Altemeyer’s (1998) RWA-Scale and Sidanius and Pratto’s (1999) SDO-Scale, respectively. Openness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism were captured using items from the IPIP scales measuring the Big Five domains (http://ipip.ori.org; see also Goldberg 1992; Goldberg, Johnson et al. 2006). Because of time limitations concerning the questionnaire we were only able to include three items to measure each RWA, SDO, and personality factors. For the same reason and because research so far showed no considerable results for the importance of conscientiousness concerning political behavior, we excluded this personality factor from our questionnaire.

To assess political self-efficacy we additionally used two out of the four standard operationalizations involving (1) people like me don’t have any say about what the government does, and (2) sometimes politics seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what is going on (Madson 1987).

Concerning political behavior, we included the probability to vote in the upcoming Viennese regional election as well as explicit party choice for this election.

3 Examples of ads can be looked up at http://www.hcstrache.at
Finally we studied two broad research questions:
(1) Does personality in the sense of the Big Five contribute to explaining turnout in the Viennese case at hand?
(2) Can personality help to explain right-wing voting (i.e. voting for FPOE) in Vienna?

4. Empirical Findings

4.1 Does Personality contribute to explaining turnout via direct effects?

Our first hypothesis focused on the question whether personality contributes to explaining turnout in a simple linear model. We therefore first of all tried to explain prospective turnout using stepwise linear regression with socio-demographic variables (gender, age, education, employment status, migration background, and interactions between those variables) as independents. Results show a rather poor R square, indicating that only 4% of variance in prospective turnout is explained by the significant (alpha .05) predictors age and education (see table 1, Model 1).

Table 1: Results of stepwise linear regression on prospective turnout (four-point scale)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Significant Independents (standardized beta)</th>
<th>R2</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Socio-demographic Model</td>
<td>Gender Age Education Employment status Migration background Interactions</td>
<td>Age (0.17)  Education (0.14)</td>
<td>.040</td>
<td>19.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Socio-demographic + Personality Model</td>
<td>Age Education Extraversion Agreeableness Neuroticism Openness</td>
<td>Age (0.19)  Education (0.10) Extraversion (0.20) Agreeableness (0.07)</td>
<td>.084</td>
<td>20.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the next step we again entered socio-demographic variables (age and education) as obligatory independents in the model and added our four personality scores (openness, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism), assuming that they too have a linear direct effect on expected turnout. Results show an R square rise by .044, from .040 in model 1 to .084 in model 2 (see table 1). This is still a rather poor explanation, but it nevertheless shows that personality can explain additional variance in prospective turnout. In the final model two out of the four tested personality factors are entered: extraversion as well as agreeableness, whereas extraversion has the higher standardized beta coefficient.

As a result this second model implicates that prospective turnout rises with higher age, higher education, higher extraversion and higher agreeableness, while age and extraversion have the strongest effects. Therefore and similar to the results by Rammstedt (2007) we can conclude that extraversion contributes to explaining prospective turnout. Additionally, and what makes a difference to Rammstedt (2007), we also get a very small but significant effect from agreeableness to turnout.

4.2 Does Personality contribute to explaining turnout via direct and indirect effects?

To analyze direct and indirect effects of personality on turnout we conducted a path model and entered political self-efficacy as a mediating variable between personality and prospective turnout. This approach seems obvious as self-efficacy is indeed based on personality characteristics but over all a product of social learning and it finally determines, whether the person executes a specific behavior or not (Bandura 1982).

Based on our so-far data analysis and other research results (Huber and Rattinger 2005; Rammstedt 2007) the path model then includes the following observed dimensions and paths:
(a) Political self-efficacy having a direct effect on prospective turnout
(b) Openness, extraversion, and neuroticism having indirect effects on prospective turnout via political self-efficacy
(c) Extraversion having an additional direct effect on prospective turnout

As the model fit was rather poor, we had to adapt the model slightly and reduced it to the following with all paths significant at the .05 level:
Results first of all show the obvious direct effect of political self-efficacy on prospective turnout. Another significant direct effect can be demonstrated for extraversion on prospective turnout. Additionally extraversion and neuroticism have indirect effects on prospective turnout, which are mediated through political efficacy (see figure 2). Considering the total effects of extraversion and neuroticism we can conclude that extraversion has higher impact on prospective turnout than neuroticism (see table 2). Nevertheless neuroticism is important because it lowers political self-efficacy significantly. Extraversion on the other side strengthens prospective turnout directly as well as indirectly through its positive effect on political self-efficacy.

Table 2: Direct, indirect and total effects of personality on prospective turnout in path model 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality Factor</th>
<th>Direct Effect on Prosp. Turnout</th>
<th>Indirect Effect on Prosp. Turnout</th>
<th>Total Effect on Prosp. Turnout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Once again we conducted another model including personality factors as well as socio-demographic variables. Based on our so-far data analysis the path model this time includes the following observed dimensions and paths:
(a) Political self-efficacy having a direct effect on prospective turnout
(b) Extraversion, neuroticism and education having indirect effects on prospective turnout via political self-efficacy
(c) Extraversion and age having direct effects on prospective turnout

All of these paths are significant at the .05 level (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Path model 2 including direct and indirect effects from personality and socio-demography via political self-efficacy on prospective turnout (Chi-Sq=30.1 p=.000, CFI=.915, RMSEA=.087)

These results again show a substantial direct effect from political self-efficacy on prospective turnout. Other significant direct effects can be demonstrated for extraversion and age on prospective turnout. Furthermore extraversion, neuroticism, and education have indirect effects on prospective turnout, clearly mediated through
political efficacy (see figure 3). As far as the total effects are concerned the results show the highest impact on prospective turnout for extraversion, followed by age, education and neuroticism (see table 3).

Table 3: Direct, indirect and total effects of personality and socio-demography on prospective turnout in path model 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observed dimension</th>
<th>Direct Effect on Prosp. Turnout</th>
<th>Indirect Effect on Prosp. Turnout</th>
<th>Total Effect on Prosp. Turnout</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Therefore direct and indirect effects of personality on political efficacy and turnout do not change their pattern when including age and education in the model: extraversion strengthens prospective turnout directly as well as indirectly through its positive impact on political self-efficacy. Neuroticism slightly lowers prospective turnout indirectly because of its negative effect on political self-efficacy. While higher age directly leads to higher prospective turnout, education has a strong but indirect effect on prospective turnout via political self-efficacy. Hence higher education leads to a higher sense of political self-efficacy which in turn leads to higher prospective turnout.

4.3 Does Personality contribute to explaining right-wing voting via direct and indirect effects?

With our last statistical analysis we wanted to find out, if and how much personality can contribute to explain right-wing voting. Similar to other research findings concerning prejudice (Duckitt 2001; Sibley and Duckitt 2008; Cohrs and Asbrock 2009) we computed a path model with four different levels. The first level contains personality factors (extraversion, neuroticism, openness, and agreeableness), the second one ideological belief dimensions (RWA and SDO), the third one outgroup attitudes (egalitarian and anti-Muslims), and the fourth factor contains political behavior in the form of right-wing voting. Our path model includes the following observed dimensions and paths:
(a) Personality factors having direct effects on ideological beliefs as well as on outgroup attitudes
(b) Personality factors having indirect effects on outgroup attitudes via ideological beliefs
(c) Personality factors having indirect effects on right-wing voting via ideological beliefs and outgroup attitudes
(d) Ideological beliefs having direct effects on outgroup attitudes and right-wing voting
(e) Ideological beliefs having indirect effects on right-wing voting via outgroup attitudes
(f) Outgroup attitudes having direct effects on right-wing voting

Due to better model fit we adapt the initial model slightly and excluded extraversion from the analysis. The following figure 4 shows all paths significant at the .05 level.

Figure 4: Path model 3 including direct and indirect effects from personality, ideological beliefs, and outgroup attitudes on prospective turnout (Chi-Sq=50.12 p=.000, CFI=.969, RMSEA=.073)

The results support our hypothesis that personality indirectly affects right-wing voting through its effects on ideological beliefs and outgroup attitudes. According to our findings the best predictor for right-wing voting are anti-Muslim attitudes – a result which has to be interpreted within the political context as Muslims currently are the most preferred enemy concept of the FPOE (see chapter 3). Anti-Muslim attitudes in turn are predicted by both RWA and SDO, whereas the latter two in addition to these indirect effects also have direct effects on right-wing voting. The results furthermore show a slightly positive direct effect of neuroticism on RWA and considerable negative effects of openness on RWA and agreeableness on RWA and SDO.
We therefore can conclude that low openness, low agreeableness and high neuroticism leads to high RWA, which in turn favors the formation of anti-Muslim attitudes, which finally strongly affect right-wing voting. Low agreeableness additionally leads to high SDO, which too promotes the development of anti-Muslim attitude, which finally induce right-wing voting. On the other side high openness and agreeableness may protect from right-wing voting because of their lowering effect on RWA and SDO. For high agreeableness the results further predict a reduced probability for right-wing voting because of its direct and indirect effects on egalitarian attitudes.

5. Discussion

Our example of the Viennese regional election shows that empirical research on turnout and voting behavior can be improved when putting more emphasis on personality. Although our data was not exclusively designed for this question and therefore mainly lacks full-scale measurements of personality factors and ideological beliefs, results are promising. Turnout seems to be at least partly a matter of personality, namely of extraversion and neuroticism. Especially extraversion shows substantial and stable effects on turnout, direct as well as indirect via political self-efficacy. Political self-efficacy additionally is strengthened by education, which consequently affects turnout indirectly too.

When it comes to explain right-wing voting, personality dimensions are even more important. Our empirical findings clearly support the initial assumption that the effects of personality on right-wing voting are mediated by ideological beliefs and outgroup attitudes. As we have seen, openness, agreeableness, and neuroticism affect right-wing voting through RWA and anti-Muslim attitudes. Agreeableness additionally affects right-wing voting through SDO and anti-Muslim as well as egalitarian attitudes. According to our results, the ‘typical right-wing voter’ is low on openness and agreeableness and possibly quite high on neuroticism. This basic personality pattern promotes RWA, an ideological belief that in turn fosters the approval and internalization of anti-Muslim attitudes. These anti-Muslim attitudes were finally proven to be the best single predictor for right-wing voting. The latter result is consistent within the current political context, in which right-wing FPOE channels xenophobic tendencies more than ever against our fellow Muslim citizens.

Our findings on right-wing voting enable us also to conclude the following: high openness and agreeableness may be able to prevent from right-wing voting because
of their lowering effects on RWA. High agreeableness additionally inhibits SDO and promotes egalitarian attitudes which in turn lower the probability for right-wing voting.

Finally the results of this empirical study turned out to be quite convincing concerning right-wing voting, which is indirectly affected by personality dimensions via ideological beliefs and outgroup attitudes. As far as the explanation of turnout is concerned we indeed were able to significantly improve our models through adding personality dimensions, but there is still a quite high amount of variance left that cannot be explained with the given data. For our future research it first of all it may be useful to get more valid data by applying full-scale measures of personality and by observing actual voting or non-voting behavior on Election Day.
References


