Do personality traits predict civic engagement and political participation?

Understanding offline and online engagement and participation.

Silvia Russo¹ & Erik Amnå²

¹University of Torino, Department of Psychology
²University of Örebro, Youth & Society (YeS), School of Humanities, Education and Social Sciences

Corresponding author: Silvia Russo, silvia.russo@unito.it
Abstract

According to the literature, personality traits are considered efficient predictors of levels and forms of civic engagement and political participation. As concerns offline forms of political participation, personality traits have been shown to be mediated by interest in politics, political efficacy and interpersonal discussion about politics. However, the effects of personality traits on online forms of political engagement have been largely understudied. The present cross-sectional research (N = 601, young adult sample) had two main goals. The first one was to replicate previous results concerning the link between personality traits, as measured by the Big Five Inventory, on legal and illegal offline political activities. The second goal was to explore the relationships between personality traits and online political participation. Structural equation model results supported previous findings indicating that the positive effects of Openness to experience and Extraversion on the engagement in legal political activities were, at least partially, mediated by political efficacy, interest in politics, and interpersonal discussions; Agreeableness and Conscientiousness had a negative direct effect on the engagement in illegal political activities, while Openness to experience had a positive direct effect on it. As concerns online political participation, structural equation model showed that Openness to experience and Extraversion had positive and mainly indirect effects on the three forms of online participation (e-expressive, e-communication, and e-targeted), while Conscientiousness and Agreeableness had negative effects on information seeking and supportive participation. The impact of Conscientiousness was totally mediated by the time spent on Internet. The results showed that personality traits play an important, even if mostly indirect, role in predicting offline and online political activities. It is concluded that not only offline but also online political activities seem to be marked by a personality divide.
Personality traits have been a widely shown predictor of various political behavior and political attitudes. Indeed, personality traits have been shown to affect interpersonal discussion about politics (Hibbing et al., 2011), political ideology as well as economic and social attitudes (Gerber et al., 2010), and a variety of political behaviors (Mondak et al., 2010). The role of personality traits, defined as ‘“dimensions of individual differences in tendencies to show consistent patterns of thought, feelings, and actions’’ (McCrae & Costa, 1990, p. 23), has been recognized as important in determine the extent to which people participate in politics some decades ago (Levinson, 1958; Milbrath, 1965). By relying on the prominent Big Five approach which represents, at present, the most comprehensive framework to address individual differences in personality (Vecchione & Caprara, 2009), recent studies addressed direct and indirect effects of personality traits on different forms of offline political participation, i.e. legal and illegal activities, turnout and protest activities (Gallego & Oberski, 2012). On the whole, these studies converge in showing that, just as in other life domains, personality plays a fundamental role in shaping the extent to as well as the way into which people participate in a variety of political activities.

However, what personality traits means for predicting one of the most recently developed modes of the political repertoire is still a largely understudied area. For sure, the online or “e-participation” form of political activities has drawn the attention of political behaviors researchers. The most common approach to this topic can be identified in the evaluation of the impact of internet political activities (e.g., information gathering, chatting) on offline forms of political participation and/or political attitudes (e.g., Best & Krueger, 2005; Jennings & Zeitner, 2003; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008; Xenos & Moy, 2007). However, a growing body of research adopted a different perspective on this topic by focusing explicitly on either the predictors of online participation (e.g., Anduiza et al., 2010) or on its internal dimensions (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2011). Nevertheless, the role played by personality traits in predicting different forms of online political participation has been largely understudied.
This contribution addresses the relationship between personality traits, as measured by the Big Five Questionnaire, comparing offline and online political participation. We first present contributions aimed at analyzing the dimensionality of online political participation and discuss the relationships between offline and online forms of political participation. We then review empirical findings showing how personality traits influence offline participation and the factors that mediate these effects. We present the research specifically focused on the studies addressing the links between personality traits and Internet use. Finally, we present and discuss results related to: (a) the impact of personality traits on offline forms of political participation; (b) the impact of personality traits on different dimensions of online participation. We relied on a young adult sample given that the literature emphasized the potential of the Internet in revitalizing political engagement among young people (e.g., Bakker & De Vreese, 2011; Östman, 2012; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008).

**Online forms of political participation**

Online political participation includes a variety of internet based political activities (Ekman & Amnå, 2012). Somewhat surprisingly, in spite of a widespread increment of Internet usage, contributions dedicated to the study of the dimensionality of online political participation are still scarce. A research by Gibson and Cantjioch (2011) is, at present, one of the most accurate study available on this topic. The authors focused on two broad hypotheses. The first one, the differentiation hypothesis, holds that online participation constitutes a multi-dimensional concept that comprises different sub-types of activities. The second one, the integration hypothesis, holds that sub-branches of online participation have a correspondence with traditional offline forms of participation.

Relying on a UK representative sample, Gibson and Cantjioch provided support for the differentiation hypothesis and identified four main dimensions of online political participation: ‘E-formal’ taps formal activities specifically related to electoral campaigns, including actions such as registering as supporter of a party or candidate website; ‘E-targeted’ defines traditional online
political activities such as donating to causes, contacting government and signing an online petition; ‘E-expressive’ captures online activities related to social media such as posting comments of a political nature on a blog or a wall of a social networking site; ‘E-communication’ combines attention to online news sources and online discussions about politics and corresponds to the more passive form of engagement.

As concerns the integration hypothesis, the authors’ findings supported the idea that the sub-types of online political participation have correspondence and are integrated with offline participation activities. Indeed, from a theoretical point of view, the four dimensions of online political participation all have corresponding actions in the offline participation (e.g., attention to newspapers and face to face interpersonal discussion). Moreover, their analyses showed a clear link between some online and offline behaviors, such as contacting a politician via post or telephone and via email.

Despite the correspondence between online and offline political activities, we argue that the medium through which involvement in such activities occurs should not be underestimated when it comes to the study of the relationships between personality factors and political participation. Indeed, if it is true that the engagement in online political activities is strongly related to its offline counterpart, it has to be noticed that some e-participatory acts imply different levels of individual effort and can produce different consequences. For example, this is the case for keeping oneself informed about political issues: With the advent of online news sources, being attentive to political issues assumed a more active form than it traditionally did (Krueger, 2002; Gibson & Cantjioch, 2011). Similarly, the expression of one owns thoughts and positions in the web certainly may have the potential to be more influential and more immediately publicly spread than offline forms of expression (Robertson et al., 2010).

In light of these considerations, the idea that personality characteristics may differentially impact on offline vs. online political participation activities deserves to be investigated. In the next
sections we present empirical contributions that investigated the relationship between personality traits and offline participation, as well as the impact of personality traits on Internet usage.

**Personality traits and offline participation**

The Big Five approach holds that five traits provide a comprehensive model of personality structure: These traits dimensions are Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Emotional Stability. As mentioned, the Big Five approach is today the most prominent approach to the study of personality and the five factors have been found and described in many different countries and cultural contexts (Allik & McCrae, 2004; McCrae & Costa, 1997; McCrae et al., 2005; Schmitt, Allik, McCrae, & Benet-Martínez, 2007; Heine & Buchtel, 2009).

Both theoretical considerations and empirical findings converge in showing that personality factors are particularly important for explaining civic engagement and offline participation. Openness to Experience, which describes the breadth and depth of the individual’s mental life (John et al., 2008), is related to information seeking and all sorts of engagement; it has been shown to positively influence political participation and civic engagement (Mondak & Halperin, 2008; Vecchione & Caprara, 2009). There is evidence supporting the idea that Openness to Experience fosters the engagement in traditional forms of political participation mainly through the mediation of political efficacy, interest in politics and interpersonal discussion about political topics (Gallego & Oberski, 2012; Mondak et al., 2010; Vecchione & Caprara, 2009).

Similarly, Extraversion, which implies an energetic approach toward the social world (John et al., 2008), showed strong and positive effects on political participation, especially on those activities that involve social contacts such as attending at political meetings and volunteering for campaigns (Mondak & Halperin, 2008). Since extraverts are likely to be embedded in large social networks they have higher chances to engage in interpersonal discussion about politics: Indeed, previous research showed that Extraversion has an indirect effect on protest activities through the mediation of interpersonal discussion (Gallego & Oberski, 2012). Moreover, by virtue of their
optimistic and confident character, extraverts typically have higher levels of general personal efficacy: As showed by Vecchione and Caprara (2009), political efficacy acts as mediator of the relationship between Extraversion and political participation.

As concerns the other three factors, null, mix or conditional results have been found. Conscientiousness (indicating the tendency to be dutiful, organized and reliable) should be positively related to those political activities that are considered as civic duties. However, since people scoring high in this trait are more sensible to social desirability, they are supposed to avoid forms of participation that contradict social norms, such as protests. Somewhat surprisingly, previous studies failed to find consistent effects of Conscientiousness on either traditional or protest political activities (e.g., Anderson, 2009; Gallego & Oberski, 2012; Mattila et al., 2011; Mondak & Halperin, 2008; Mondak et al., 2010).

Agreeableness, which characterizes a prosocial and communal orientation towards the others, has been related to political participation in two ways. First, since people scoring high in this trait are altruistic and prosocial, they are likely to be active in political processes and nonpolitical volunteering (Bekkers, 2005; Okun, Pugliese, & Rook, 2007). Second, Agreeableness may be negatively related to political participation because it implies the tendency to avoid conflicting situations. In line with this idea, Ha and colleagues (2013) recently found that Agreeableness was strongly and negatively related to different forms of non-electoral political activities in South Korea and argued that their finding may be due to the high degree of conflict that characterizes Korean politics.

Finally, Neuroticism (which refers to one’s proneness to negative emotions and anxiety) may impact on political participation in two different ways. On the one hand, people low in Neuroticism should be more confident and thus more willing to participate; on the other hand, people high in Neuroticism tend to be anxious and may be prone to participate because of their worry for political issues. However, previous studies mainly found null effects on a variety of
political participation indicators (Gallego & Oberski, 2012; Mattila et al., 2011; Mondak et al., 2010; Vecchione & Caprara, 2009).

**Personality traits and Internet usage**

While the relationship between personality traits and online political participation has been largely understudied, some scholars investigated whether personality predispositions influence Internet usage.

Empirical findings showed that Openness to Experience is positively related to Internet usage, especially to the use of the Web for entertainment and product information (Tuten & Bosnjak, 2001), the use of blogs (Guadagno et al., 2008) and social media use (Correa et al., 2010; Ross et al., 2009). This is not surprising since people high in Openness to Experience are characterized by curiosity and novel-seeking while those scoring low on this trait tend to prefer adhesion to established patterns. At this regard it is interesting to notice that the impact of Openness to Experience on different online activities may vary over time since the novelty of Internet applications vanishes quickly (Correa et al., 2013).

Early studies on the link between personality and Internet revealed that Extraversion was negatively related to Internet usage (Amichai-Hamburger, 2002; Amichai-Hamburger & Ben-Artzi, 2003; Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel, & Fox, 2002). These scholars hypothesized that the anonymity that characterized social connections in Internet may have attracted people who feel less comfortable in face-to-face social relationships, i.e. introverts. However, also in this case, the rapidly changing Internet applications such as social networking may well explain why more recent studies have found a reversal on the relationship between Extraversion and some specific Internet uses. Indeed, recently it has been shown that Extraverts tend to make great use of social media (e.g., Ryan & Xenos, 2011; Wilson et al., 2010). This may be explained by the fact that contemporary social networks, such as Facebook, are not characterized by great anonymity and instead are typically used to interact with known people (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfeld, 2006).
As concerns Conscientiousness, empirical findings revealed that it is negatively related to Facebook and social networks usage (Ryan & Xenos, 2011; Wilson et al., 2010); similarly Landers and Lounsbury (2006) found that Conscientiousness was negatively related to general indicator of Internet usage. This evidence has been explained considering that people scoring high on this trait tend to be rule-follower, organized, reliable, and structured: This personal characteristic may be in conflict with the unstructured environment of the Internet. Similarly, another explanation advanced is related to the fact that more conscientious persons tend to be engaged in offline structured activities and, consequently, they have less time to use the Internet.

Also Agreeableness was found to be negatively related to Internet usage (Landers & Lounsbury, 2006). In this case it has been hypothesized that the negative relationship between Agreeableness and Internet usage may reflect a personal difficulty to get along with others that results in spending more time on the web than in face-to-face interpersonal contacts.

Finally, results concerning the relationship between Neuroticism and Internet use are mixed. Some authors found that Neuroticism was negatively related to Web usage (Tuten & Bosnjak, 2001) and less likely to actively participate in online communities activities (Cullen & Morse, 2011), some others found that it was positively related to social media use (Correa et al., 2010) and blogs use (Guadagno et al., 2008), and some others found null effects (Correa et al., 2013; Landers & Lounsbury, 2006).

A final remark concerns a recent research by Correa and colleagues (2013). The authors investigated the relationship between personality traits and the use social media for political purposes, such as uploading political videos and posting on blogs about politics. By analyzing simple correlations they found that Extraversion and Neuroticism were significantly and positively associated with political social media use. However, their study offer mixed evidence because none of the personality traits was a significant predictor of social media political use when included in a regression analysis, with the exception of a marginally significant effect of Openness to Experience.
Moreover, it has to be noticed that the authors’ research was limited to the investigation of three out of five personality traits (Openness, Extraversion, and Neuroticism).

**Goals and hypotheses**

The main goal of this study was to explore the relationship between personality traits and online forms of political participation. Since, at present, no empirical evidence is available on this topic we based our expectations on two different sets of studies. If, in line with the integration hypothesis (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2011), online political participation is strongly related to the traditional forms of offline political participation, we should expect personality traits to impact on the engagement in online political participation as follows: a) Openness to Experience should foster all types of online participation, at least partially mediated by interest in politics, political efficacy, and interpersonal discussion (Gallego & Oberski, 2012; Mondak et al., 2010; Vecchione & Caprara, 2009); b) Extraversion should foster online political participation through the mediation of interpersonal discussion and political efficacy (Gallego & Oberski, 2012; Vecchione & Caprara, 2009). We did not advance specific expectations regarding the other personality traits since previous findings were mixed.

On the other hand, if engagement in online political activities is, at least partially, determined by the medium through which it occurs, we should expect personality traits to impact on online political participation mainly through the mediation of Internet usage in accordance with previous findings. We thus expect: c) Openness to Experience to have a positive impact on online participation through the mediation of Internet usage; d) Agreeableness and e) Conscientiousness should have a negative impact on online political activities through the mediation of Internet usage (Landers & Lounsbury, 2006). Again, we did not advance specific hypotheses concerning the impact of the other personality factors because the evidence available is mixed and differential effects have been found for different types of Internet use.
**Data and method**

We relied on survey data gained in Sweden on a 26 years old sample of respondents \(N = 601\), 45.1% women. The data collection took place between November 2010 and February 2011. The questionnaire was mailed to the target sample together with information about the study and a personalized link to the online version of the questionnaire. Participants received a gift card of 250 SEK (28 € approximately) for participations. Non respondents were sent a reminder card after 7 to 10 days; after another 7 to 10 days non respondents were contacted over phone. In January non respondents received a new questionnaire and a short information letter in the mail. On the whole, over 995 people contacted, 601 completed the questionnaire (response rate of 60.4%).

**Online political participation**

Respondents were invited to answer a set of questions regarding the frequency of engagement in a variety of online political activities. They were asked to indicate whether, in the month preceding the survey, they have been engaged in each activity several times (3), occasionally (2), or never (1). We relied on Gibson and Cantjioch’s (2011) sub-types of online participatory acts for testing the dimensionality of online participation through the mean of a CFA. Since none of the items available tapped the ‘E-formal’ dimension, we tested a three-factor model. The model is displayed in Figure 1 and items full texts are reported in the Appendix. Fit indexes indicated that our data nicely fit the model, CFI = .961, TLI = .954, RMSEA = .058 (WLSMV estimator for ordered categorical variables).

**Offline political participation**

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1 This study was made possible by access to data from the Political Socialization Program, a longitudinal research program at YeS (Youth & Society) at Örebro University, Sweden (Amnå, Ekström, Kerr & Stattin, 2009). Responsible for the planning, implementation, and financing of the collection of data were professors Erik Amnå, Mats Ekström, Margaret Kerr and Håkan Stattin. The data collection was supported by grants from Riksbankens Jubileumsfond. The study has been approved by the regional Ethical Committee at Uppsala, Sweden.
Respondents have been asked to indicate whether they have been engaged several times (3), occasionally (2), or never (1) in 13 offline political activities in the last 12 months. Eight items tapped involvement in legal political activities (e.g., contacting a political or a public official, signing petitions, and attending public meeting dealing with political or social issues), and five items tapped involvement in illegal political actions (e.g., participating in an illegal action/demonstration or occupation, breaking the law for political reasons, and writing political messages or graffiti on the wall). A confirmatory factor analysis (WLSMV estimator for ordered categorical variables) provided good fit indexes (CFI = .954, TLI = .943, RMSEA = .040) for a two-factor solution.

**Personality traits**

The scale is a Swedish translation of the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John, 1990, John et al., 1991; John & Srivastava, 1999). The BFI consists of 44 items that are distributed among the five personality dimensions Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Extraversion, and Neuroticism. Examples of items are ‘‘I consider myself as someone who: is outgoing, sociable (Extraversion), is considerate and kind to almost everyone (Agreeableness), is curious about many different things (Openness to Experience), get nervous easily (Neuroticism), makes plans and follows thought with them’’ (Conscientiousness). The answers ranged between 1 ‘strongly disagree’ to 5 ‘Strongly agree’. The original version of BFI has shown good reliability and convergent as well as discriminant validity (Benet-Martinez & John, 1998; Costa & McCrae, 1992; John & Srivastava, 1999; Watson & Hubbard, 1996; Watson et al., 1994). In the current study, Cronbach αs range from 0.72 to 0.88. An exploratory factorial analysis yielded a five-factor solution with dimensions clearly related to the Big Five. The correlations between factor scores and corresponding BFI subscales ranged from 0.93 to 0.98.
Mediating variables

Political efficacy. Participants have been asked to indicate whether if they really tried, they could manage nine politics-related activities, such as being an active member of a political organization and convince others to sign petitions about political or social issues. Answers ranged from 1 ‘I couldn’t absolutely manage it’ to 4 ‘I could absolutely manage it’. A Cronbach α of .93 indicated a good internal consistency of the scale. We thus computed a mean index of political efficacy.

Interest in politics. Interest in politics has been assessed through two items: “How interested are you in politics?” and “How interested are you in what is happening in the society?”. Answers ranged from 1 = not at all interested to 4 = very interested. The answers were averaged in a single indicator, $r = .55$.

Interpersonal discussion. Respondents have been asked how often they talk with their friends about politics or societal issues and about what they have heard on the news about what is happening in Sweden and around the world. These two questions have been presented also to assess the frequency of interpersonal discussion with colleagues, class mates, partners, and parents with answers ranging from 1 = never to 4 = very often. We averaged all the items in a general index of interpersonal discussion ($α = .86$).

Internet usage. Respondents indicated how much of their free time they spend on a normal day using Internet on a scale with the following options: more than 6 hours (6), 3-6 hours (5), 1-3 hours (4), 30 minutes-1 hour (3), up to 30 min (2), no time (1).

Results

As a first step, we tested a latent variables model (WLSMV estimator) aimed at replicating previous findings concerning the link between personality traits and offline forms of political participation. We included in the model all the direct paths from each personality trait and the two forms of offline political participation. Personality traits have been modeled as latent variables
measured by three item parcels each. The combinations of items used to compute the parcels have been randomly chosen. Legal and illegal political participation have been modeled as latent variables measured by eight and five single items respectively, as indicated above in the measures description. Besides the link between personality traits and political participation, we also added three mediating variables: In line with previous findings, we considered political efficacy as mediator of the link between Openness to Experience and legal political activities; political interest as mediator of the link between Openness to Experience and both legal and illegal political activities as well as of the link between Extraversion and legal/illega political activities; finally, interpersonal discussion about politics has been included as mediator of the link between Openness to Experience and Extraversion and both types of political activities.

The model showed reasonable fit indexes: CFI = .913, TLI = .900, RMSEA = .035 (WLSMV estimator). As depicted in Figure 2, in line with the expectations, we found that Openness to Experience fostered political efficacy, interest in politics and interpersonal discussion. In turn, these mediating variables all showed significant and positive effects on legal political participation. The analysis of indirect effects indicated that Openness to Experience had positive and significant effects on both the forms of offline political participation via the mediation of these three variables (see Table 1). Similarly, Extraversion fostered interpersonal discussion: Again, the indirect effect of this personality trait is positive and significant on the engagement on both legal and illegal political activities. We also found significant direct effects of personality traits on the engagement in offline political activities. As concerns legal political activities, Openness to Experience and Extraversion directly influence the engagement in such activities, above and beyond the mediating variables that we considered. Openness to Experience also directly and positively influenced the engagement in illegal political activities, while Conscientiousness and Agreeableness negatively impacted on it.

As a second step, and more interestingly for the aim of the study, we replicated this model with two important differences. First, the model was aimed at explaining online political participation; second, we also included respondents’ Internet usage as mediating variable of the link
between personality traits and participation. The model, displayed in Figure 3, showed good fix indexes: CFI = .928, TLI = .917, RMSEA = .040.

As concerns the e-communication dimension, which combines online interpersonal discussion and information seeking, we found that Openness to Experience foster this type of online participation both directly and indirectly via the mediation of political efficacy, offline interpersonal discussion, interest in politics, and Internet usage (Table 1 reports significant indirect effects). Similarly to legal offline political participation, Extraversion exerted a positive and indirect effect on e-communication through the mediation of political efficacy and offline interpersonal discussion; we did not find a significant link between Extraversion and the time spent in Internet. Moreover, in line with the expectations, we found an indirect and negative effect of Conscientiousness on the e-communication: In our sample, Conscientiousness had a negative impact on Internet usage, which in turn promoted all online participatory activities. Finally, we also detected a negative effect of Agreeableness on e-communication: The effect was direct and not mediated by Internet usage.

As concerns e-targeted activities, the pattern of results was similar to those related to e-communication, with some exceptions. First, only Agreeableness directly and negatively impacted on this dimension, even if its effect was only marginally significant ($p = .052$). Second, offline interpersonal discussion did not impact on it: Consequently, the indirect effects of Openness to Experience and Extraversion via the mediation of interpersonal discussion did not reach statistical significance.

Finally, none of the personality traits had direct effects on the e-expressive form of online participation, with the exception of a slightly marginal negative effect of Agreeableness ($p = .07$). Among the mediating variables considered, only interest in politics and Internet usage had a positive impact on this form of participation: The indirect effects of Openness to Experience through these variables were only marginally significant, while Conscientiousness had a negative indirect effect via the mediation of Internet usage.
Discussion

The main aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between personality traits and online political participation. As a first step, we replicated previous results concerning the link between personality traits, as measured by the Big Five Inventory, and legal and illegal offline political activities. In line with previous findings (e.g., Gallego & Oberski, 2012; Mondak et al., 2010; Vecchione & Caprara, 2009), we found that Openness to Experience and Extraversion have a positive indirect effect on the engagement in legal political activities. The former via the mediation of political efficacy, interest in politics, and interpersonal discussion; the latter via the mediation of political efficacy and interpersonal discussion. Moreover, these traits also have direct effects on legal participation, above and beyond the mentioned mediators.

As concerns the engagement in illegal political activities, we found that Openness to Experience have direct and indirect positive effects on it, while Extraversion fostered illegal political participation only through the mediation of interpersonal discussion about politics. More interestingly, our data revealed direct and negative effects of Conscientiousness and Agreeableness on the engagement in illegal political actions. Even if previous studies rarely detected such effects (but see, for an exception, Gallego & Oberski, 2012), they have straightforward interpretations. Indeed, the literature (Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2001) suggests that agreeable people tend to avoid conflictual situations: It is thus not surprising that people scoring high in Agreeableness are less prone to be engaged in illegal actions such as participating in an illegal demonstration/occupation or breaking the law for political reasons given that these acts clearly entail conflicts. Similarly, conscientious people tend to follow socially acceptable norms and practice: Illegal actions, by definition, are not recognized by the society as established and justifiable patterns of behavior.

As concerns online political participation, a first remark should be done about its dimensionality. Previous studies mainly focused on its relationship with offline political participation and, only recently, researchers recognized online participation as the principal focus of
their investigations. For this reason, a few contributions on the dimensionality of online participation are available to date. Relying on Gibson and Cantjioch’s (2011) recent research, we found that three main factors underlie the engagement of online political activities. The first one, e-communication, combines seeking online political information and online discussion about political issues; the second one, e-targeted, includes traditional online forms of participation such as contacting politicians via email and signing online petitions; the third one, e-expressive, is related to the active and political use of social media, capturing online political activities that pertain to the sphere of what has been labeled UGC, user-generated content (Eynon & Malmberg, 2011; Leung, 2009). On the whole, our data supported the differentiation hypothesis by showing that online participation can be conceived as a multi-dimensional concept.

The analysis of the impact exerted by personality traits on online political participation revealed four main patterns. The relationship between Openness to Experience and e-communication clearly remarked the one with offline participation: Indeed, also in this case, Openness exerted both direct and indirect effect through the mediation of interest in politics, political efficacy, interpersonal discussion, and Internet usage. Likewise, Openness indirectly fostered the e-target and the e-expressive participation, even if the last one only marginally. On the whole, our data revealed that people open to new experiences tend to be engaged in political activities, no matter the type of actions. Extraverted individuals also tend to be engaged in online political actions, especially in those activities related to information seeking and communication (e-communication) and to traditional online political actions (e-targeted), with these effects totally mediated by offline interpersonal discussions and political efficacy.

Interestingly, for Conscientiousness and Agreeableness, we found effects similar to those detected on illegal offline political activities: Indeed, both traits have negative influence on the online political participation dimensions. However, we argue that the reasons accounting for these effects may be slightly different. First of all, the results showed that conscientious people tend to be less engaged in online political participation mainly because they spend less time in Internet: This is
in line with previous studies showing that Conscientiousness is negatively related with Internet usage in general and with social network usage (Landers & Lounsbury, 2006; Ryan & Xenos, 2011; Wilson et al., 2010). One explanation advanced for this negative relationship is that conscientious people tend to be involved in offline structured activities and, for this reason, they have less time to use the Internet (Landers & Lounsbury, 2006). However, if considering results obtained for offline participation, we did not find any relationship between Conscientiousness and legal political activities. Thus, at least in our sample, the idea that conscientious individuals prefer offline over online forms of political participation was not supported. Alternatively, it is plausible that the unstructured environment of Internet does not represent a fitting context for conscientious individuals, and that this mismatch prevents online participation.

As concerns Agreeableness, we found that agreeable people tend to be less engaged in all forms of online participation, independently from the time they spend online. Discussing about the link between Agreeableness and illegal participation we argued that agreeable people tend to avoid conflicts and that this may be the reason for which they are less involved in illegal actions. Adopting this perspective, we hypothesize here that agreeable people may be less involved in online participation mainly due to the high visibility of online acts. Indeed, it is reasonable that the Internet environment implies a fast and wide spread of the actions undertaken: For this reason, online actions today may be easy targets for strong criticisms and can easily be the starting point for disputes. This argument can be supported also by considering that people scoring low in Agreeableness tend to be antagonistic, critical and self-centered (Sandy, Bordman, & Deutsch, 2000). In this light, they should not be afraid of public confrontation; in addition, they may find in the web appropriate places where the expression of their own ideas and believes can be under the spotlights, at least for Internet users.

To summarize, we found a mix of direct and indirect effects of personality predispositions on offline and online political participation. Besides providing support to previous studies as concerns the relationship between personality traits and offline participation, our analyses revealed
that legal offline and online participatory actions are differently predicted by individual predispositions. This difference would support the independence hypothesis, i.e. the idea that online participation diverge from established modes of offline participation (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2011), rather than the integration hypothesis. Indeed, even if it is true that online political actions are positively related to their offline counterparts, we showed that – at least as far as personality is concerned – their predictors are not fully correspondent.

Moreover, even when partialling out the effects of the main mediating variables identified in previous research, we detected interesting direct paths between personality factors and online political participation. Scholars have recently been debating over whether the ‘digital divide’, i.e. the inequality of material and skills access to new technologies (Van Dijk & Hacker, 2003), can affect political engagement (e.g., Sylvester & McGlynn, 2010); results from this study suggest that also the ‘personality divide’ can affect offline and online political participation.
References


presented at the “Methodological challenges in participation research” Colloquium, Institute for Advanced Social Studies, Cordoba, Spain.


*Social Science Computer Review, 28*(1), 64-74


Appendix

Online political participation items.

E-communication:

Item 1. Linked news to my friends

Item 2. Discussing societal or political questions with friends on the net

Item 4. Visiting a site of political or civic organization

Item 6. Seeking information about politics or societal issues on the web

Item 7. Reading about politics in a blog

Item 9. Viewing videos or film clips about political or societal questions

Item 12. Linked to video clips with a political content

Item 13. Chatted with friends on the Internet about something I’ve seen on the news

Item 14. Connected to a group at Facebook (or similar) dealing with societal issues

Item 16. Linked to music which I think is good and which had a political-societal message

E-targeted:

Item 3. Signing an online petition

Item 5. Participating in an online based protest

Item 11. Sent an email to a politician

E-expressive:

Item 8. Writing about politics or societal issues my own blog or homepage

Item 10. Producing/adding videos with a message which I believe is important

Item 15. Created a group on Facebook (or similar) about a societal issue which I know a lot about and think is important
Table 1. Indirect effects from personality traits to offline and online forms of political participation

**Offline political participation**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>From</th>
<th>To</th>
<th>Via</th>
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<td>Legal acts</td>
<td>Efficacy</td>
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<td>2.89</td>
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**Online political participation**

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Note. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; + $p < .10$
Figure 1. Three-factors model for online political activities. Standardized loadings are displayed, all coefficients are \( p < .001 \).
Figure 2. Prediction of offline political participation. Item parcels for personality traits measurement and single items for political participation measurement have been omitted from the picture for the sake of clarity. Standardized coefficients are displayed, *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; + $p < .10$. 

![Diagram showing relationships between personality traits and political participation](image-url)
Figure 3. Prediction of online political participation. Item parcels for personality traits measurement and single items for political participation measurement have been omitted from the picture for the sake of clarity. Standardized coefficients are displayed, *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$; + $p < .10$. 