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# Personality and Individual Differences

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## Introduction to the special issue from personality to politics



In the field of psychology, there has long been an interest in the measurement, underpinnings, and effects of personality. Interestingly, while some political scientists expressed interest in the study of personality traits in the 1950s and 60s, relatively little research materialized on the topic. Over the past decade or so, however, there has been renewed interest in the study of personality among political scientists. In fact, there is now a burgeoning literature on the link between personality traits—often measured using the Big Five model—and political behaviors and attitudes, including ideology, partisanship, and political participation. Importantly, it is not just personality traits that are now being integrated into theoretical and empirical models of political behavior. Scholars have become more interested in the link between a wide-range of individual differences and political behavior, including cognitive ability, psychological dispositions (e.g., cognitive style), genetic factors, and physiology. Some scholars have even looked at differences in brain structure and function, hormone levels and responses, disgust sensitivity, voice pitch, and physical attributes such as facial features, attractiveness, and formidability.

There are a number of exciting things about the work in this area. For one thing, this is an area that is truly interdisciplinary in nature. In the past decade or so, there has been a real synthesis between bodies of research that originate in different disciplines, which has led to important new insights into how people behave in the context of politics. For example, while there is a rich literature in political science on the determinants of political engagement and there is a rich literature in psychology on the Big Five traits, these two areas of research did not connect until recently. Excitingly, while this type of work is being done by scholars in the fields of political science and psychology, there are now interdisciplinary teams (sometimes featuring political scientists, psychologists, sociologists, economists, and biologists) working to learn about how individual differences and politics are related. Another benefit of research in this area is that we are gaining new insights about the underpinnings of political behavior. We are now starting to get a clearer picture of the ways in which individual differences influence how people think, act, and feel when it comes to politics. This has led to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of political behavior.

The papers in this special issue represent cutting edge of research in the area of personality and politics. Although the papers take on a wide range of topics and use a variety of different approaches, measures, and methods, they all illustrate the value of doing research that crosses disciplinary boundaries. In addition, each paper provides important findings about the relevance of individual differences to political life. Below, we provide a brief overview of each paper in the special issue, but we encourage you to spend time reading each of these excellent papers.

Several of the papers in this issue deal with moral and ethical predispositions. In his paper “The roots of intolerance and opposition to compromise: The effects of absolutism on political attitudes,” Kevin Arceneaux examines the correlates and consequences of individual differences in absolutism. He finds that there is a great deal of variance in ethical predispositions across individuals and have political consequences. For example, absolutists are more likely to adopt extreme opinions and display intolerance toward political disagreement. Caleb Reynolds, Anastasia Makhanovaac, Ben Ng, and Paul Conway also study ethical and moral predispositions, but they focus on cognitive style, endorsement of the binding moral foundations (prioritizing sanctity, loyalty, and respect for authority), and individual differences in religiosity and conservatism. They find that people who engage in less analytical thinking tend to endorse the binding (but not individualizing) moral foundations, which may lead them to endorse various elements of religiosity and conservatism.

A number of studies in this issue focus on the Big Five traits. For example, in their study “Personality traits and foreign policy attitudes: A cross-national exploratory study,” Timothy Gravelle, Jason Reifler, and Thomas Scotto use data from large-scale public opinion surveys in six countries (the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, Canada, and Australia) to examine how the Big Five traits shape individual attitudes towards foreign policy. They find that the Big Five personality traits play an important role in shaping individuals’ views of world affairs. For example, those with high scores on Openness are much less likely to be isolationists than those with low scores. Colin Scott and Mike Medeiros also examine the Big Five traits, but they focus on what personality types are likely to run for office and get elected. Using a unique survey of municipal candidates from two Canadian provinces and survey data from citizens, Scott and Medeiros show that compared to other citizens, candidates are higher in extraversion, openness to experience, and emotional stability.

Several of the papers in this special issue focus on prejudice. In their paper “Understanding prejudice in terms of approach tendencies: The Dark Triad traits, sex differences, and political personality traits,” Peter Jonason, Dylan Underhill, and C. David Navarrate focus on the relationship between the Dark Triad and prejudice. They find that a number of the Dark Triad traits are related to prejudice. For example, Machiavellianism is linked to out-group racial prejudice. Narcissism and psychopathy are linked to sexual and racial prejudice. They also find some interesting sex differences (i.e., men were biased against other men and members of racial out-groups). In addition, in “Deprovincialization as a key correlate of ideology, prejudice, and intergroup contact,” Jessica Boin, Giulia Fuochi, and Alberto Voci examine the relationship between deprovincialization—which refers to a worldview that fosters openness to other cultures and outgroups—and

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personality, cognitive styles, values, political ideologies, intergroup contact, and prejudice. They find that deprovincialized people report higher scores on positive contact, lower scores on negative contact, better outgroup attitudes, and lower levels of prejudice.

Three of the papers in this issue focus on what people pay attention to (and how they react). In their paper “Individual-level differences in negativity biases in news selection,” Sarah Bachleda, Fabia Neuner, Stuart Soroka, Lauren Guggenheim, Patrick Fournier, and Elin Naurin study negativity biases in news selection (NBNS). They introduce a survey-based measure of NBNS and use it to explore the correlates of negative news bias in surveys in the U.S., Canada, and Sweden. They find that some respondents are more prone to NBNS than others, and that NBNS likely reflects some combination of long-term personality differences and short-term situational factors. It is also systematically related to a number of economic and political attitudes. In “Motivated viewing: Selective exposure to political images when reasoning is not involved,” Clarisse Warren, Stephen Schneider, Kevin Smith and John Hibbing examine motivated reasoning and selective exposure in the context of politics. They introduce a novel indicator of people’s tendency to prolong exposure to favored political images or to truncate exposure to disliked political images. Their measure makes it possible to better understand individual differences regarding concepts such as negativity bias and asymmetric political attention even when substantive, issue based information is not at play. Patrick Stewart, Carl Senior, and Erik Bucy also examine how people react to different political images, though they use a different approach than Warren et al.

In “Honeymoon or hangover? How election outcomes produce emotional shifts to winning candidate smiles” Stewart, Senior, and Bucy examine changes in self-reported happiness, anger, and distress to different smile types expressed by Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, measured immediately prior to and again following the 2012 presidential election. They find that Obama supporters reported an increase in happiness when shown examples of the president’s smile after the election but no change in response to Romney’s smiles. However, Romney’s followers reported a significant increase in anger and distress towards Obama’s smiles post-election, but minimal change to their own candidate.

Our hope is that this collection of papers not only adds to the literature but also fuels additional work. Indeed, each of the papers in this issue generates important follow-up questions that deserve our attention.

Aaron C. Weinschenk<sup>a,\*</sup>, Bert N. Bakker<sup>b</sup>, Christopher T. Dawes<sup>c</sup>,  
Gillian Finchilescu<sup>d</sup>, Robert Klemmensen<sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Political Science, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay,  
United States

<sup>b</sup> Amsterdam School of Communication Research, University of Amsterdam,  
the Netherlands

<sup>c</sup> Wilf Family Department of Politics, New York University, United States

<sup>d</sup> Department of Psychology, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

<sup>e</sup> Department of Political Science, University of Southern Denmark, Denmark  
E-mail address: [weinscha@uwgb.edu](mailto:weinscha@uwgb.edu) (A.C. Weinschenk).

\* Corresponding author.