Personality and political orientation

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Abstract

This study examined the incremental validity of the Big-Five personality traits over primarily demographic factors in predicting left-right political orientation (PO) in a large British adult sample. Gender and trait Openness was most strongly correlated with PO. The regression indicated that females who were better educated, less religious and of higher social class were more left wing. Personality traits doubled the variance account for (4% to 9%) indicating that Open, more Agreeable people were more Left-Wing and Introverted, more Conscientious people more left wing. Agreeableness and Neuroticism showed an interaction with social class, such that for high social class, left wing orientation increased with agreeableness (but not for low social class); and for high social class, left-wing orientation increased with neuroticism, whilst for low social class, right-wing orientation increased with neuroticism.

Word Count:

Key Words: Political Orientation; Personality Traits; Demographic Variables

Introduction

There is an extensive but scattered literature on the relationship between personality traits and political beliefs and behaviours (Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008: Eysenck & Wilson, 1978; Jost, Nosek & Gosling, 2008; Mondak & Halperin, 2008; Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007). This study is concerned with the incremental validity of the Big Five personality traits over demographic and religious beliefs in explaining self-rated political orientation (PO)

It has been demonstrated that personality traits are logically and demonstrably associated with different (but related) political measures like voting, party membership, general interest, taking part in demonstrations and discussions (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling, Raso & Ha, 2011). Mondak and Halperin (2008) found that Openness and Conscientiousness most consistently related to many political variables particularly *knowledge and participation.* Brandsttatter and Opp (2014) reviewed eleven studies on personality and politics and found that Openness was positively, and Agreeableness negatively, correlated with *political protesting*. In an Italian study. Leone et al. (2012) found only Extraversion (r=.16) and Openness (r=.27) related to an *interest in politics*. The only common factor that these studies seem to show is the predominant role of trait Openness in both an interest, and taking part, in political issues and events.

More recently Furnham and Cheng (2016) found Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Openness were significantly and positively association with political interest, whereas Conscientiousness was negatively associated with political interest and voting behaviour in a large British sample

One central issue is how much variance do personality traits account for with some studies indicating as much as a third (Brandstatter & Opp, 2014). There are three issues involved when

comparing studies. The first is the measure political beliefs and behaviour. These include voting preference and history; party allegiance and participation; interest and knowledge and orientation. Inevitably different outcome measures lead to different results. Second, there are different measures of personality though it should be noted most measures of the Big Five are closely related, but that this too could account for different results. Third, there is the sample which could be important because of the different political history in different countries.

In this study we look at PO asking people to rate themselves on a single Left vs Right wing scale which is a familiar concept to the British. We assumed based on previous research (see above studies) that Agreeableness (H1) and Openness (H2) would be associated with left-wing leanings while Conscientiousness would be more associated with right wing views (H3). Further, it was also predicted that females more than males (H4), better rather than less educated (H5) and higher rather than lower social class (H6) and less, rather than more religious (H7) participants would rate themselves as more left wing. It was hypothesised the personality factors would account for as much variance as the demographic factors (H8). Finally, as noted by Mondak and Halperin (2008), *"explanations of political behaviour centred primarily on predictors other than personality may gain considerable additional nuance if analysts give careful attention to the possibility that individuals' traits may magnify or constrain the effects of other processes."* (p361). A variable that seems particularly likely to have interactive effects with personality is social class since personality effects which affect degree of alignment with class interests should affect left/right wing orientation differently depending on social class identification. Thus we also hypothesise (H9) that the effects of personality on political orientation are moderated by social class.

Method

Participants

There were 2644 females and 1210 males. In all 33% were between 18 and 30 years, 45% between 31 and 50 yrs and the remainder 50 and older. In all 36.4% had A Levels/12th grade or less; 39.9% had a university degree and 23.7% some post-graduate education. They classified themselves as to social class: 3.6% lower working class, 24.6% middle working class, 14.9% upper working class, 22.9% lower middle class, 29.9% middle middle class, 4.8% upper middle class and 0.3% upper class. They also rated how religious they were on a 10 point scale: 1=Not at all to 10 Extremely. The mean 3.27 (SD=2.60) with 65% with scores under 3. Less than 15% gave scores of 7 to 10.

Measures

Participants rated themselves on a 9 point Strongly Right Wing =1 to Strongly Left Wing=10 scale. The mean score was 5.60 (SD=1.80) and the scores were normally distributed. The response of voting is coded as Yes/No. Personality traits were assessed by the 50 questions from the International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) (Goldberg, 1999). Responses (5-point, from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree") are summed to provide scores on the big five personality traits: Extraversion, Emotionality/Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Intellect/Openness.

Results

Correlational Analysis

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 1 shows that the first six of the seven hypotheses were confirmed. More self-defined right wing people tend to be female, better educated, of lower social class, and more religious.

Further, right wing participants tended to be Conscientious, Disagreeable, Introverted, Stable and Closed to Experience. This confirmed the first eight hypotheses.

Regression analyses

In order to investigate the incremental validity of personality over demographic variables a two-step regression was computed, a third step was added to test the moderation hypothesis (H9).

Insert Table 2 about here

Table 2 shows the results of the step-wise regression. The first block, which consisted mainly of demographic variables accounted for 4% of the variance with four of the five factors being significant. The second block containing the Big Five personality traits more than doubled the variance accounted for. Openness to experience was the most powerful predictor. The final block (containing the interactions of personality variables with social class) adds modest but significant explained variance. There are significant interactions of social class with both agreeableness and neuroticism. Thus H9 is (partially) confirmed. Figure 1 illustrates the nature of the interactions. Agreeableness has most effect on political orientation for high social class. The effect of Neuroticism on political orientation is masked by the interaction with social class. For low social class higher neuroticism is associated with greater right wing orientation, whilst for high social class higher neuroticism is associated with greater left wing orientation.

Discussion

To a large extent this paper confirmed many studies in this area despite the fact that a wide variety of political belief and behaviours have served as the criterion variable. It showed that personality is systematically and predictably related to political ideology accounting for around 5% of the variance.

The correlational analysis showed that, of the variables examined, the highest correlation (r=.17) was between Openness and political orientation which showed Open people are more left wing. The second highest correlation was between religiousness and political orientation (r=-.09) showing that the more religious people were, the more right wing they were. Only one variable was not significantly correlated with political orientation, namely age.

The regression analysis showed first that gender, age, social class and religiousness accounted for 4% of the variance. Better educated, less religious, higher social class females were more left wing. Second the five personality factors added 5% variance with Open, Agreeable, Introverts, low on Conscientiousness being more left wing.

What the data in this area appear to show is that irrespective of the personality test used and and the measure of political attitudes, the results suggest that certain personality variables are consistently related to politics. Few however try to explain the process. First, as personality is reasonably stable over the lifetime it explains in part why people do not often radically change their beliefs. Second, the kindness and empathy of Agreeable people suggests why they should associate themselves with left-wing political causes often associated with the distribution of wealth. Openness is associated with curiosity, intelligence and positive attitudes to change which may explain why in this, and all studies, it is a consistent and predictable correlate of left-wing political beliefs. Equally Conscientiousness is often associated with big and small "C" conservatism and may explain that relationship.

The finding that social class moderates the relationship between Agreeableness and Neuroticism and political orientation is particularly interesting and may offer some explanation

for the inconsistent or weak findings in relation to neuroticism in previous studies (Mondak and Halperin, 2008), since the relationship is reversed between high and low social class. We might speculate that concern for the welfare of others (and particularly the less fortunate), characteristic of those high in Agreeableness, will lead to a tendency to adopt political views contrary to economic self-interest to those of higher social class but not of lower social class. The explanation of the interaction with Neuroticism is less apparent, but may rest in the greater concern for fairness among those high in Neuroticism (see e.g. van Hiel et al.).

This modest study adds to the canon of literature which shows a consistent relationship between personality and politics albeit that it does not account for a great deal of the variance.

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Scale	M (SD)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1.Gender	0.31 (0.46)	-										
2.Age	35.30 (12.50)	-.01	-									
3. Education	4.51 (1.35)	.03	-.05**	-								
4. Social Class	3.65 (1.35)	.13**	-.00	.32**	-							
5. Political Orientation	5.60 (1.80)	- .09**	-.01	.12**	-.05**	-						
6. Religiousness	3.27 (2.61)	-.14**	.06**	.02	.00	-.10**	-					
7. Extraversion	3.06 (0.83)	-.06**	-.01	.04*	.06**	-.03*	.02	-				
8. Agreeableness	3.67 (0.61)	-.10**	.04**	-.01	-.01	.07**	.13**	.13**	-			
9. Conscientiousness	3.69 (0.68)	-.10**	.18**	.04**	-.00	-.09**	.06**	.08**	.17**	-		
10. Neuroticism	2.99 (0.83)	-.21**	-.10**	-.07**	-.12**	.04**	.01	-.32**	-.29**	-.18**	-	
11. Openness	3.59 (0.65)	.09**	.02	.16**	.15**	.17**	-.03	.20**	.05	-.08**	-.08**	-

*p<.05　　**p<.01　　***p<.001

Model	Beta	t
Model 1		
Gender	-0.10	-6.37***
Age	0.01	0.36
Education	0.16	9.38***
Social class	-0.09	-5.09***
Religiousness	-0.12	-7.31***
F = 35.98***, Adj R^2 = .04		
Model 2		
Gender	-0.12	-7.05***
Age	0.02	1.05
Education	0.14	8.67***
Social class	-0.10	-5.89***
Religiousness	-0.12	-7.66***
Extraversion	-0.07	-4.22***
Agreeableness	0.10	6.08***
Conscientiousness	-0.10	-6.21***
Neuroticism	0.02	1.23
Openness	0.17	10.71***
F = 40.23***, Adj. R^2 =.09		
Model 3		
Gender	-0.11	-6.86***
Age	0.01	0.83
Education	0.14	8.50***
Social class	-0.10	-6.00***
Religiousness	-0.12	-7.78***
Extraversion	-0.07	-4.24***
Agreeableness	0.10	6.08***
Conscientiousness	-0.10	-6.15***
Neuroticism	0.02	1.03
Openness	0.17	10.81***
Extraversion x Social class	0.00	0.16
Agreeableness x Social class	0.06	3.89***
Conscientiousness x Social Class	0.01	0.41
Neuroticism x Social Class	0.06	3.63***
Openness x Social Class	0.02	1.52
F = 28.67***, Adj. R^2 =.10		

*p<.05   **p<.01   ***p<.001

Figure 1: Significant personality interactions with social class
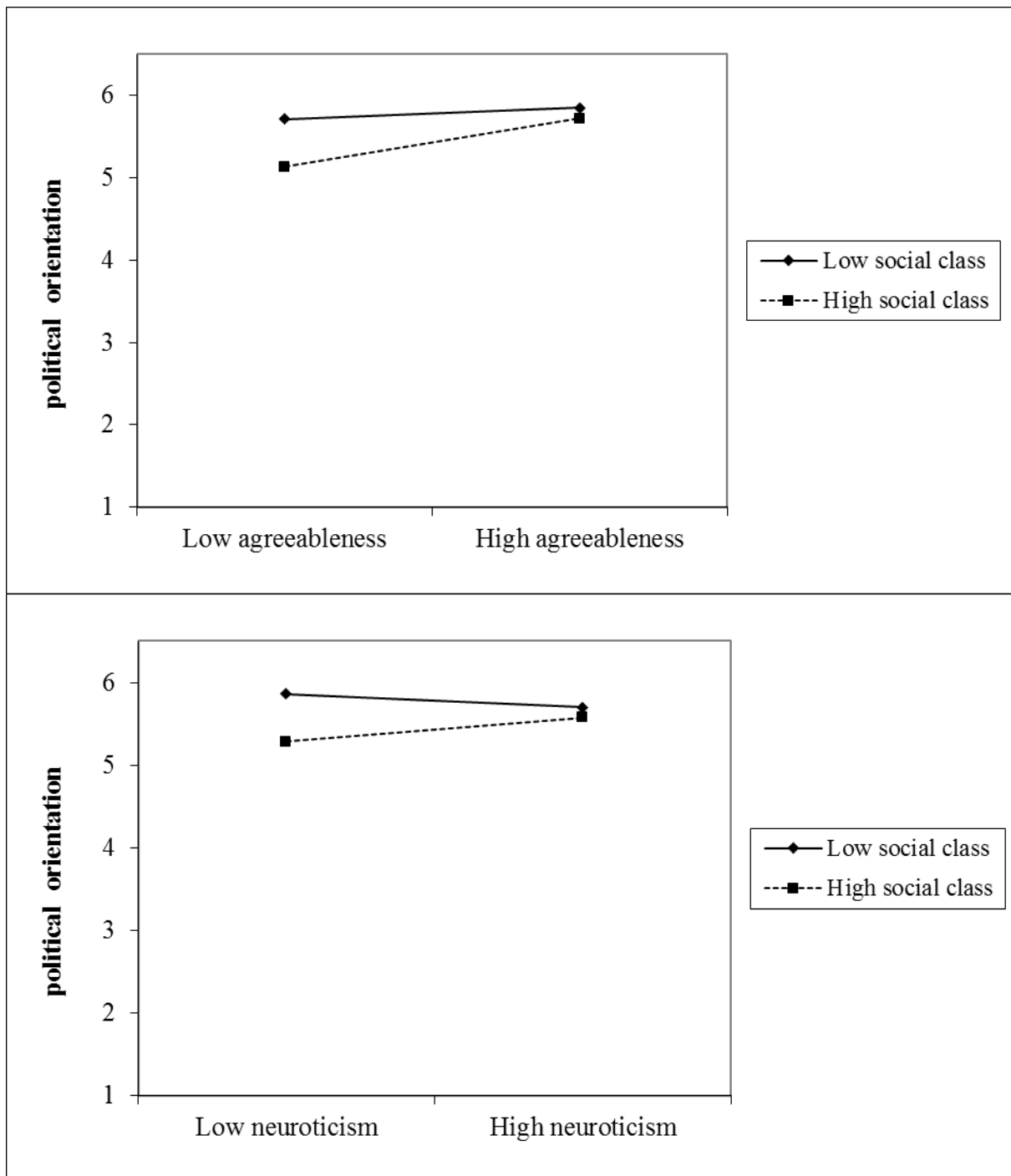
Low and High defined as -/+ 1 standard deviation from the mean