

An Enlightened Citizenry: The Personality of Civic Aptitude¹

Courtesy of Indiana University



Aaron Dusso, Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, IUPUI School of Liberal Arts

Since the first scientific examinations of voters, scholars and civic-minded individuals have lamented the woefully low levels of political knowledge possessed by the average American. After all, democracy is supposed to rest on a foundation of enlightened citizens who not only have the ability to understand the important political issues of the day, but can vote for the candidate(s) that best represent their personal political views. Unfortunately, 80 years of public opinion research has, without exception, demonstrated that the vast majority of Americans do not have this ability (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960;

¹ Adopted from the author's forthcoming book titled, *Personality and Political Attitudes: Civic Capacity and the Challenges of Democratic Politics* to be published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2017.

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Caplan, 2007; Converse, 1975; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Lau & Redlawsk, 2006; Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948; Schudson, 1999). The result of this research has been a consistent call for more and better civics education.

While the goal of better education is laudable, as a remedy to the problem of civic ignorance it presupposes that the cause of this problem is a lack of exposure to information. In other words, if people only knew the facts, they would think and behave differently. The problem with this belief is that, at best, it is only partially true. Research in psychology has routinely shown that people do not engage the world with an open mind. They actively avoid information that may contradict what they already believe (Nickerson, 1998; Olson & Zanna, 1979); interpret ambiguous information so as to fit with their existing beliefs (Fazio & Williams, 1986; Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979); rationalize and actively reject disconfirming information (Taber, Cann, & Kucsova, 2009); are biased when retrieving information from memory (Zanna & Olson, 1982); overestimate how much others agree with them (Van Boven, Judd, & Sherman, 2012); and assume others are more influenced by media than they are (Andsager & White, 2007; Cohen, 2003). Indeed, Sherman and Cohen (2006) refer to our ability to protect our sense of self as a "psychological immune system" (p. 184). Importantly, this immune system functions beyond our conscious decision-making. That is,

people do not consciously choose to engage in any of these psychological processes. They are part of our unconscious automatic information processing, which drive so many of our everyday behaviors (Lodge & Taber, 2013; Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000; Marcus, 2013).

When it comes to politics, partisanship is particularly problematic as an unconscious influence on our thoughts and behaviors. For instance, when new information has the proper partisan cue, individuals soak it up like a sponge without critical thought (Smith, Ratliff, & Nosek, 2012). When faced with ambiguous information they will often simply adopt their preferred candidate or party's views (Brader, 2012; Bolsen, Druckman, & Cook, 2014; Cohen, 2003; Lenz, 2012; Petersen, Skov, Serritzlew, & Ramsøy, 2013). If they do not know their preferred candidate's positions, they will happily fill in the blanks to match their own desires (Sherrod, 1971-72; Tomz & Van Houweling, 2009). Importantly, education and knowledge do not solve this problem. When political scandals or controversies appear, it is the politically sophisticated that rely on their partisanship to guide their interpretation of the situation the most (Wagner, Tarlov, & Vivyan, 2014). And, perhaps most disturbingly, when highly knowledgeable individuals are asked simple factual questions, they will bend reality to fit their partisan desires (Kahan, Peters, Dawson, & Slovic, 2013; Kahan et al., 2012).

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One conclusion drawn from this research is that the reason individuals consistently fail to live up to the ideal of the democratic citizen is far more complex than a lack of standard civic education. Thus, if one is interested in improving overall civic aptitude, one must design programs that account for unconscious drivers of behavior. My work, with support from the Indiana

University Center for Civic Literacy, focuses on the connection between the Big Five personality traits and various forms of civic aptitude. I find that these traits have a significant independent effect on the likelihood of knowing political facts and being able to connect personal policy preferences to the correct political party. In what follows, I will provide an outline of this research and discuss how these findings demand a new approach to improving overall civic aptitude.

THE PERSONALITY OF CIVIC UNDERSTANDING AND ENGAGEMENT

Personality has been a focus of study for the better part of a century (Allport, 1937; Allport & Odbert, 1936; Cattell, 1943; Fiske, 1949). While there are many different concepts that fall under the personality umbrella, the past four decades have seen the emergence of a hierarchical representation of these traits with five broad personality characteristics representing the top of this pyramid (Goldberg, 1990, 1995; John, Robins, & Pervin, 2008; McCrae & John, 1992). The Five Factor Model or Big Five personality traits consist of:

1. Extraversion,
2. Agreeableness,
3. Conscientiousness,
4. Neuroticism/Emotional Stability, and
5. Openness to Experiences.

These traits are not considered to be under our conscious control, but have been found to have a significant effect on thoughts, attitudes, and behavior. In the realm of politics they have been shown to influence one's political participation, sense of civic duty, partisanship, ideology, and political efficacy (Cooper, Golden, & Socha, 2013; Gerber et al., 2011; Ha, Kim, & Jo, 2013; Hibbing, Ritchie, & Anderson, 2011; Mondak, 2010; Mondak & Halperin, 2008; Mondak et al., 2010; Vecchione & Caprara, 2009; Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Zimbardo, 2009).

My research builds on this work, but with a direct focus on how personality affects a citizen's ability to live up to the ideals of the democratic citizen. Democratic governance places a heavy burden on citizens to not only understand extremely complex topics, but to know who to hold accountable for failures and reward for triumphs. There is little doubt that most people

struggle to live up to this ideal. However, how much of the cause of this failure can be traced to one's durable personality traits is still an open question. I have sought to provide an answer to this question by administering a national survey—the Political Personality Success and Failure (PPSF) survey. This survey was conducted online in July 2014 with sampling from Survey Sampling International's existing panels and using Qualtrics online survey platform (total sample size of 2,314 individuals).

The PPSF survey provides a measure of respondents' Big Five personality traits along with a host of standard demographic (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, age, education) and political variables (e.g., partisanship, ideology, political knowledge). It then probes respondents' interest in and knowledge of five specific issue areas. These areas are: food stamps, same-sex marriage, health insurance subsidies, U.S. energy policy, and drug testing welfare recipients. Specifically, the sets of questions in each of these issue areas tap respondents' ability to answer factual questions about the particular topic; their subjective opinions about each of these policy areas, and their opinion regarding which political party best handles the issue. Thus, I am able to test the connection between personality and some basic civic competencies like being accurately informed about the topic and being able to connect one's own policy preferences to the correct party or candidate. Democratic societies are dependent upon these high civic aptitude citizens.

KNOWING FACTUAL INFORMATION ABOUT COMMON POLITICAL ISSUES

The PPSF survey provided an opportunity to test the Big Five's influence on knowing factual information across several different areas. I asked respondents the factual questions shown below by issue area.

Food stamps

- About what percent of federal food stamp benefits do you think go to individuals living in households that have income from a job?
- About what percent of federal food stamp benefits do you think go to individuals who are working age but do not work a paid job and are not living with children, elderly, or disabled individuals?

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's February and December 2014 reports,² the answer to the first question is 42 percent (I coded answers between 37 and 47 percent as correct) and the answer to the second question is 13.8 percent (I coded answers between 9 and 19 percent as correct).

Same-sex marriage

- In states where same-sex marriage is legal, can religious organizations like churches and synagogues legally refuse to marry same-sex couples?

The survey was administered prior to the Supreme Court's decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, therefore, the particular phrasing of the question. The answer is that they can legally decline to marry same-sex couples. Many states have built into their laws specific statements exempting religious institutions from being required to marry same-sex couples. In addition, courts have routinely found such an exception legal (Masci, 2013).

Health insurance subsidies

- Do you get help paying for your health insurance by either the state or federal governments?

The answer here is yes for virtually everyone who has health insurance, whether they know it or not. Of course, many people do not think about the fact that the health insurance they get through their employer is tax-free income which costs the U.S. taxpayer more than \$150 billion annually (Mettler, 2011).

U.S. energy policy

- Has U.S. oil production gone up or down since President Obama took office in January of 2009?

The answer to this question is that it has unequivocally gone up.³

² See www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap

³ See the U.S. Energy and Information Administration's website here: <http://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.cfm?id=18831>

Drug testing welfare recipients

- Do you think people who receive some type of welfare assistance are more likely to abuse drugs than the average U.S. citizen?
- Members of which party are more likely to support requiring drug testing for people receiving welfare?

The answer to the first question is no (Grant & Dawson, 1996; Yacoubian & Urbach, 2002); and the answer to the second question is the Republican Party. To test the effect of the Big Five on the probability of answering these questions incorrectly, I estimated logit models containing controls for gender, race, age, education, political knowledge, political interest,

Table 1. Summary of Models Predicting the Big Five's Effect on Incorrectly Answering Factual Questions

Question	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Neuroticism/ Emotional Stability	Openness to Experiences
% of food stamp recipients in households w/ income?					* -
% of food stamp recipients not living w/dependents, capable of working, but not earning income?	*+				
Can religious organization refuse to marry same-sex couple?					
Do you get help paying for health insurance?		*+	*+		
Has U.S. oil production increased since President Obama took office?	*+			* -	* -
Welfare recipients more likely to be on drugs than average?				* -	* -
Party more likely to support drug testing welfare recipients?	*+		* -		* -

Notes: * = trait significant predictor in the model; + = positive relationship; - = negative relationship

religiosity, partisanship, ideology, the importance of the issue to the respondent, and how ambiguous the respondent's thoughts are about the issue.⁴ Because there are multiple models with numerous variables, I do not present full model results here.⁵ To simplify matters, I have distilled the results down to one table. Table 1 presents for each of the Big Five personality traits an indicator if the result was statistically significant ($p = .05$, one-tailed test) along with the directional sign.

As can be seen in Table 1, the two traits that have the most consistent effects are *Openness* and *Extraversion*. In the case of *Openness*, the higher one scores in the trait, the less likely they are to incorrectly answer 4 of the 7 questions. On the other hand, the more extraverted one is, the less likely they are to answer 3 of the 7 questions correctly. Thus, introverts who are high in openness appear to be more likely to be ideal democratic citizens. The other traits appear to have less of an effect. *Neuroticism/Emotional Stability* reaches significance twice. In both instances, scoring higher decreases the likelihood of answering the questions incorrectly. *Agreeableness* only reaches significance once. In this case, it increases the probability of not knowing one is getting help paying for health insurance.

Conscientiousness also reaches significance twice, but in one case an increase in the trait decreases the likelihood of getting the question wrong and in the other it increases the likelihood of getting it wrong. Thus to the extent that *Conscientiousness* has an effect, whether it is positive or negative depends on the topic. Here, an increase in *Conscientiousness* increased the probability of knowing which party supports drug testing welfare recipients, but decreases knowing one is getting help paying for insurance. Perhaps, this isn't too surprising. Scoring high in *Conscientiousness* is often found to be a predictor of support for right-wing policies and parties. Thus, knowing that Republicans are the party that supports drug testing welfare recipients would be expected. And since much of the push to decrease welfare spending in the United States

⁴ Documentation of coding rules for each of these variables is available upon request.

⁵ Full model results are available upon request.

is also driven by the Republican Party, one might also expect that these individuals do not think of their subsidized health insurance as a form of welfare.

CONNECTING PERSONAL POLICY PREFERENCES TO THE CORRECT PARTY

If a proper functioning democracy depends on anything, it depends on the ability of voters to connect their personal policy preferences to the political party that best represents those interests—an extremely low bar. In this case, voters can believe anything they want, be it factual or not. All they have to do is know which political actors have the same beliefs. Yet, 20 to 30 percent of voters struggle to make this connection (Bartels, 1996; Dusso, 2015; Lau & Redlawsk, 1997, 2006; Lau, Andersen, & Redlawsk, 2008; Sokhey & McClurg, 2012).

Once again, I use the PPSF survey to examine the effect that the Big Five personality traits have on the ability of citizens to connect their personal policy preferences to the correct party. Respondents answered two simple questions for each of the five issue areas: the first about their subjective preferences on the issue, and the second about which political party handles the issue best. The five issue areas were purposely chosen because there are clear and unequivocal differences in how the two parties believe the issues should be handled. Thus, whatever the respondent believes about an issue, there is a correct party for them to choose. Table 2 presents the questions along with the party that correctly matches each answer.

Importantly, every question contained neutral or don't know options. Thus, the responses were not forced to pick a party by the available options. Only those who gave affirmative policy responses one way or the other were coded as being right or wrong when designating a particular party as being best at handling the issue.

Table 3 presents summary results after estimation of logit models estimating the effects of the Big Five on the probability of making a correct connection between one's preference and the political parties. Each model contains the same set of control variables as above. Table 3 contains one additional model that predicts the total number of times individuals failed to make

Table 2. Questions Connecting Preferences to the Correct Political Party

Question	Response	Corresponding Party
Do you think spending on food stamps should increase or decrease?	Decrease	Republican
	Increase	Democratic
Should same-sex couples be allowed to marry?	Yes	Democratic
	No	Republican
Do you support federal or state government programs designed to help individuals pay for health insurance?	Yes	Democratic
	No	Republican
Should the United States dedicate resources to developing new sources of energy or increase production of existing sources?	New	Democratic
	Existing	Republican
Do you support drug testing welfare recipients?	Yes	Republican
	No	Democratic

Table 3. Summary of Models Predicting the Big Five's Effect on Failing to Connect Preferences to the Correct Political Party

Issue	Extraversion	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness	Neuroticism/ Emotional Stability	Openness to Experiences
Food stamp spending	*+				
Same-sex marriage	*+				* -
Health insurance subsidies	*+				
Energy resources					
Welfare drug testing			* -		
Count of # Wrong	*+				* -

Notes: * = trait significant predictor in the model; + = positive relationship; - = negative relationship

the proper connection.⁶ The results here are similar to what was observed with factual knowledge. The more extraverted one is, the more likely they are to fail to make this connection in 3 of the 5 issue areas. On the other hand, increased openness is associated with a decrease in the likelihood of making this mistake when it comes to the issue of same-sex marriage. Both *Extraversion* and *Openness* are also significant predictors of the total volume of incorrect connections, although pushing individuals in opposite directions. In other words, an introverted individual high in openness appears to be the best at connecting their opinions to the proper party, whereas the close-minded extravert struggles with this connection.

Beyond the classroom, we need to begin to think about whose participation the structure of our political system encourages.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?

I have argued that individuals' civic aptitude is, in part, contingent on their personality traits. Personality is not generally understood to be under one's control. One cannot wake up one day and decide that one does not like being an introvert anymore and therefore will now be an extravert. Thus, those of us interested in improving civic engagement and discourse need to fundamentally re-examine our understanding of what causes citizen failures. We need to move beyond the singular focus on teaching facts about the political process and current issues. That is not to say that civics classes are not important and that providing basic facts to individuals of all ages has no effect. My argument is that these efforts are not enough. Lack of knowledge is only one of numerous variables driving the failures of

⁶ Full model specification and results are available upon request.

citizens to live up to the democratic ideal.

In the short-term, practical efforts suggested by the research should focus on specific personality traits. The idea is not to try to change people's personalities, but to design programs that account for personality-driven differences in understanding. Extraverts can often give the appearance of being engaged and knowledgeable, but this work suggests that this is a façade. Those scoring high in *Extraversion* showed an increased probability of not knowing facts or being able to connect their policy preferences to the proper candidate. The same is true for those scoring low in *Openness*. Civics programs that focus specifically on the needs of these individuals would be likely to bear more fruit. But beyond the classroom, we need to begin to think about whose participation the structure of our political system encourages. When participation in the political system is entirely voluntary, some people are more likely to participate than others. Research shows that the more extraverted one is, the more likely one is to participate in politics (e.g., vote, attend political rallies or meetings, or contact elected officials) (Gallego & Oberski, 2012; Gerber et al., 2011; Ha, Kim, & Jo, 2013; Mattila et al., 2011; Mondak, 2010; Mondak & Halperin, 2008). This is problematic, since those low in *Extraversion* (i.e., introverts) are more likely to approach citizen ideals for a democracy. Ultimately, the primary problem is that research in the psychological, neuro, and genetic sciences documenting the existence and causes of many of the shortcomings of human cognition have yet to be embraced by those with a practical concern for improving civic aptitude. The assumption has simply been that since we know the average American does poorly on civics tests, we should do more civics teaching. This is shortsighted. The fact of the matter is that we need a lot more research on why citizens fail. Once we begin to develop a complete understanding, we can design programs that can better counteract these causes, and will foster a debate on the role that the very structure of the political system plays in encouraging the participation of some personality types, while discouraging others.

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⁷ A complete list of references is available upon request.



ABOUT THE CENTER FOR CIVIC LITERACY

The Center's mission is to increase public understanding of civic deficit and its effect on democratic decision making, and to identify and promote the use of effective tools to help educators and others correct the problem. The Center will fulfill its mission through: Scholarly research and publication, public teaching, and community-based partnerships.