

Personality and the Policy Positions of Politicians

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Abstract

Politicians' support of or opposition to concrete policies is uniquely consequential for policymaking, public opinion, and a host of other societal outcomes. Explaining their policy positions is therefore a major research agenda in political science. Here, we evaluate the role of politicians' personality traits, measured with the Big Five typology, in shaping how liberal or conservative their economic and social policy positions are. While existing research establishes this link among non-elites, it is far from obvious that the same holds for politicians, who have systematically different personality profiles, and whose positions are constrained by party sorting. Using an in-person study of 893 legislators in five countries who completed personality questionnaires and provided detailed issue positions, we find that Openness to Experience is strongly and positively predictive of politicians' liberal positions on both economic and social policies, but a null relationship for Conscientiousness. We also find that Extraversion predicts more conservative economic (but not social) policy positions. We discuss implications for the role of elites' individual characteristics in policymaking.

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1 Introduction

There is no single group of individuals whose policy preferences are more consequential for societal outcomes than elected politicians. Whether politicians support or oppose concrete issue positions determines the substance of legislation, regulation, and budgeting decisions (Ansolabehere et al., 2001; Fenno, 1978). When politicians speak publicly on their preferences, they often have unparalleled power to shape public opinion and impact citizen behavior (Broockman and Butler, 2017; Zaller, 1992). What explains the policy positions of politicians is, therefore, the focus of a large research agenda in political science. Here, we contribute to this literature by evaluating the role of politicians' personality traits in shaping their policy positions.

A large body of research substantiates that variations in personality traits are predictive of citizens' preferences for more liberal or more conservative economic and social policies (Gerber et al., 2011). The degree to which people are open to new experiences, or have high levels of conscientiousness, for example, are both strongly associated with these outcomes, an association that is repeatedly found across electoral environments. There is also some evidence that more extraverted and more neurotic individuals are more likely to support liberal positions on social policies, but this evidence is less consistent across studies. Yet it is far from obvious that the personalities of politicians should be linked to their policy positions in the same way. First, people who run for office have unique personality profiles that differ from those of non-elites (Best, 2011; Caprara et al., 2010). If elected officials as a group possess systematically higher or lower levels of traits that predict liberal or conservative positions among the general population, then variations in politicians' policy positions may not be predicted by these traits in the same way. Second, politicians select into and operate within parties, a reality that incentivizes

consistency with party platforms. The constraints parties impose on politicians' policy positions may limit the explanatory power of individual-level factors, such as personality.

In this article, we provide evidence directly informing these questions by comprehensively evaluating the relationships between the core personality traits and the ideological issue positions of political elites. We report findings from a study with 893 politicians in five democracies, who completed established Big Five personality inventories and reported their positions on a host of concrete economic and social policy issues. While we evaluate the relationship of all five personality dimensions with our outcomes of interest, we only formulate explicit expectations about Openness to Experience and Conscientiousness. We do so because established findings in the literature suggest that these are the two most robust predictors of ideological preferences, and so we expect them to be most likely to survive the selection and sorting effects of operating in elected politics.

We find that one central personality dimension – Openness to Experience – is strongly and positively predictive of politicians' liberal positions on both economic and social policies, a relationship that is remarkably consistent across country cases, policy statements, and modeling choices. In contrast, Conscientiousness, a trait that is highly predictive of non-elite conservatism, appears not to be associated with politicians' policy positions. We also find that Extraversion predicts more conservative economic (but not social) policy positions. Our findings are robust to the inclusion of party ideology and a host of other controls, suggesting that personality has an important role in explaining politicians' positions above and beyond predicting their initial sorting into parties. Stable individual-level characteristics of politicians likely play an important role in policymaking in a way that is arguably

more direct than previously conceptualized in the literature.¹

Our findings contribute to several existing literatures. First, they advance our knowledge of how personality shapes elite decision making by showing that politicians' Big Five traits are strongly predictive of their policy positions on different domains. By doing so, they go beyond existing findings on personality and the overall ideology of elites, showing that this link does not translate directly into predicting concrete policy positions. Instead, specific personality traits are differently associated with politicians' positions on economic and social policy issues. Second, our findings uncover a systematic difference in how personality shapes policy positions among elected officials compared to citizens. While Openness to Experience survives the political selection funnel and is strongly predictive of liberal policy positions across domains, other traits that have been shown to shape citizens' issue positions – most notably, Conscientiousness – do not appear to be strongly linked to the positions that politicians hold. Moreover, one trait, Extraversion, appears to matter more among politicians than citizens, though it does not do so across domains. These patterns warrant increased attention to how personality interacts with lived experience, expertise, and institutions to shape individuals' opinions on different issues (Mondak and Halperin, 2008). Finally, in showing here that personality traits matter for elite policy positions above and beyond their partisan ideology, this study points to new, arguably even more direct ways through which individual-level

¹In literature on the Big Five in the political arena, personality has traditionally been perceived as an early-formed, stable construct that precedes the formation of ideological preferences. While this view – according to which personality at minimum temporally precedes political preference formation – is regularly adopted in studies of personality and political behavior, it is still the subject of ongoing debates (Bakker et al., 2021). Therefore, out of an abundance of caution, and acknowledging the cross-sectional nature of our design, we avoid making strong causal claims. We nevertheless maintain that the relationships we document, whether they are causal in nature or representative of more complex dynamics, are highly important for understanding elite decision making.

characteristics of officeholders shape the outcomes of the legislative process, thus contributing to ongoing debates on the individual-level predictors of elite decision making (Hafner-Burton et al., 2013; Sheffer et al., 2018)

Background and Theoretical Framework

Personality and Policy Preferences

In the past two decades, personality has emerged as one of the most powerful explanations of political behavior, and in particular, of individuals' ideological preferences. Drawing largely on the conceptual foundations of the widely used Big Five model of personality, political scientists have repeatedly demonstrated that differences in citizens' core dispositional traits explain a large share of the variation in their political ideologies (Gerber et al., 2011; Mondak, 2010). The Big Five model of personality is based on an extensive body of evidence (e.g., Costa and McCrae, 2008; Goldberg, 1992; John et al., 2008), and posits that a large portion of people's personality trait structure is represented by variations in five trait domains: Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. Detailed descriptions of each trait in this model are given in Table 1.²

²While the Big Five model is heavily used and well-validated, it does not capture the entire set of individual traits. First, there are personality characteristics that are not captured by the Big Five, such as intelligence or need for cognition (although they are not unrelated to some dimensions—see, e.g., Sadowski and Cogburn, 1997). Second, alternative typologies to the Big Five have been proposed in recent years, such as the HEXACO model, which highlights six dimensions (Ashton and Lee, 2007). Applications of the HEXACO model to political science research are nascent and promising; see, for example, Schumacher and Zettler (2019) for an application with Danish candidates for elected office.

Personality Trait	People High on Trait...	Typical Adjectives Measuring Trait
Openness Experience	to Respond positively to novelty and display a preference for innovation. They have wide interests and tend to value intellectual and philosophical matters.	Original, curious, imaginative, creative, insightful, sophisticated
Conscientiousness	Are self-disciplined, goal-oriented, and consistent. They display strong willpower and responsibility, and their actions result from a careful consideration of outcomes	Hardworking, principled, systematic, thorough, efficient, reliable
Extraversion	Are oriented toward the outer world. They are outgoing, friendly, and warm.	Energetic, assertive, talkative, active, sociable, bold, adventurous
Agreeableness	Like other people and are usually liked by them. They are good-natured, cooperative, and unselfish.	Sympathetic, kind, generous, appreciative, soft-hearted, considerate
Emotional Stability	Are even-tempered and psychologically resilient. They are able to resist their impulses, are not easily irritated, and tend to stay calm when faced with stress.	Calm, stable, relaxed, self-confident, resourceful, patient

Table 1: The Big Five Personality Traits. Based on Gerber et al. (2011).

The most consistent findings emerging from this literature concern the relationship between the traits of Openness to Experience and Conscientiousness, on the one hand, and political ideology, on the other. There is now a considerable body of research demonstrating that voters who display high levels of Openness espouse a more liberal ideology and are more supportive of left-wing parties. These findings are explained by the basic tendency of more open individuals to respond positively to novel stimuli, willingness to accept unconventional behaviors and individuals, and preference for change and innovation over tradition. People high on Conscientiousness, by contrast, tend to be more conservative and are more likely to support right-wing parties, a relationship that has been explained by their predisposition to adhere to established social norms, value individual effort, and prefer the status quo (Bakker et al., 2021; Carney et al., 2008; Fatke, 2017; Gosling et al., 2003; Jost et al., 2003). These patterns particularly stand out given that evidence on the impact of the remaining three traits on political ideology is far less consistent across studies. As Mondak (2010, p. 140) summarizes, in studies of personality and ideology, “the effects of conscientiousness and, especially, openness to experience have been of particular note both for their abundance and their substantive magnitude.”

Further investigations have extended our understanding of the personality-ideology link by demonstrating that the Big Five are not only associated with overall ideological orientations but also with citizens’ positions on concrete policy issues (for early findings, see Carney et al., 2008; Cullen et al., 2002; Schoen and Schumann, 2007). In an influential contribution from 2010, Alan Gerber and his colleagues (Gerber et al., 2010) have shown that voters high on Openness to Experience, as well as those low on Conscientiousness, are much more likely to support a variety of liberal policy proposals, such as universal health care, abortion rights, civil unions

for gay and lesbian couples, and more (see also Mondak, 2010). These findings have been replicated in multiple countries beyond the US and in relation to a variety of social and economic policies (Bakker, 2017; Fatke, 2017; Johnston et al., 2017; Lewis and Bates, 2011). It is noteworthy that while Gerber et al. (2010), as well as others (e.g., Bakker and Lelkes, 2018), find significant associations between some other traits in the Big Five model and citizens' policy positions, an overview of the literature reveals that these associations are (a) typically smaller in magnitude than those found for Openness and Conscientiousness, and (b) do not show up consistently across policy domains (Gerber et al., 2011).

Personality and Political Elites

The evidence documenting the relationship between personality and policy positions among citizens is robust. Whether citizens' personalities have a downstream impact on policy outcomes, however, is far less clear. This is in part because, in representative democracy, these (personality-conditioned) policy preferences are communicated through voting and other forms of political mobilization to elected officials, who are tasked with translating them into concrete policy measures through laws and government decisions. In that sense, understanding the root causes of the policy positions of elected officials stands out as uniquely important in the study of political behavior: elites' preferences and actions, by nature of their role, have the greatest impact on policy outcomes in democratic systems. Politicians' positions determine the substance and existence of legislation and affect resource allocation, and because politicians themselves shape public opinion through their speech and actions, they also matter for what citizens themselves want (Broockman and Butler, 2017; Zaller, 1992). On this backdrop, it is striking that empirical evidence on the

link between elites' personality and their issue positions is close to nonexistent.

Several previous studies have tested the relationship between the personality of elites and their *overall* ideology, which is measured in these studies using legislators' political parties. These studies find that the relationships observed among voters replicate with politicians almost precisely. The most consistent findings, again, are that Openness strongly predicts selection by left-wing parties, whereas Conscientiousness predicts selection by right-wing parties (e.g., Best, 2011; Caprara et al., 2003; Joly et al., 2018; Ramey et al., 2017; Rice et al., 2020). Yet, we know from past research that politicians from the same political party often hold substantially different issue positions (Ansolabehere et al., 2001; Tavits, 2009). Hence, while the party label provides valuable information about the likely *range* of a politician's ideological preferences, it says little about each legislator's personal views. Since prior studies investigating the personality and ideology of political elites have collected and analyzed data about ideology at the party level, they could not offer substantive conclusions about the predictors of legislators' support for specific policies, which is our outcome of interest. Whether the personality traits of elites are also predictive of their decision whether to support or oppose concrete policy proposals thus remains an open question.

In terms of empirical practicalities, this gap can be attributed to the inherent difficulty in gaining access to sufficiently large numbers of politicians who are willing to provide self-reports of both their personality and policy positions (Ramey et al., 2017; Rice et al., 2020). But even if elite samples were readily available, from a purely theoretical standpoint, there are reasons to suspect that the relationships documented among non-elites will not hold for elected officials. One reason for this might be selection effects: people who are interested in elected office, let alone those

who win it, have personality traits that are, on average, systematically different from those of people not participating in elected politics. Compared to citizens, politicians in Denmark (Schumacher and Zettler, 2019), Germany (Best, 2011), Italy (Caprara et al., 2010), and the US (Hanania, 2017) were found to display significantly—and substantially—higher levels of various personality traits, including those that consistently explain variations in economic and social policy positions (i.e., Openness and Conscientiousness). If politicians as a group have a unique, skewed distribution of Openness, for example (which appears to be the case), we might find among this group a different relationship from the one documented in the general population. Furthermore, politicians self-sort into political parties, and parties constrain their elected members’ ability to hold completely independent issue positions, in ways that potentially diminish the impact of individual determinants, including personality (Hanania, 2017; Joly et al., 2018). In that sense, it is reasonable to suspect that for people holding elected office, the direct link between personality characteristics and policy preferences is at least eroded, if not completely absent.

At the same time, there are also reasons to believe that personality does predict elites’ policy positions. Extensive evidence indicates that some individual-level characteristics of elected officials are strong determinants of their behavior. First, the personality of politicians impacts a suite of legislative performance indicators, such as attaining a party leadership position and getting legislation passed (Ramey et al., 2017; Rice et al., 2020). Second, despite various selection barriers, politicians are as susceptible as citizens to common cognitive biases that are prevalent among non-elites and impact their decision making logic (Linde and Vis, 2017; Sheffer et al., 2018). And third, demographic characteristics, such as gender, condition in-office behavior above and beyond partisanship and ideology (Huddy et al., 2008; Sheffer,

2019).

In sum, the relationship between the personality and policy positions of politicians has not been studied so far, possibly due to the difficulty in gathering data on the personality and the precise preferences of large enough samples of sitting legislators. Broadly speaking, two conflicting expectations emerge from past research. On the one hand, self-selection into politics and partisan institutional constraints might attenuate, or even eliminate, the associations between elite personality and policy positions found among citizens. On the other hand, individual-level characteristics of elites, including their personality traits, were found to influence various aspects of their behavior. Our goal here is to examine which of these general expectations holds empirically with a well-powered sample of elected officials.

More concretely, based on prior research into the effects of personality on the policy attitudes of citizens, as well as studies investigating the associations between elites' Big Five traits and the ideologies of their parties, we expect legislators' levels of Openness to Experience to be predictive of more liberal policy positions, and their levels of Conscientiousness to be predictive of more conservative policy positions. As for the three other traits in the model (Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Emotional Stability), while we assess their effects on politicians' policy positions in all models presented below, we do not have strong a priori theoretical expectations regarding them due to mixed findings in the literature.

2 Data and Methods

Our analysis is based on data collected directly from elected politicians in multiple legislatures. Our surveys, which were conducted in-person, included a widely used personality inventory as well as a battery of questions on various social and eco-

conomic policy issues, on which participants were asked to indicate their own personal position. These, alongside a host of self-reported and observed covariates, are the main moving parts of the analysis.

2.1 Sample and Case Selection

The core data used in this project were collected in two separate but related projects, in 2015 and 2018-2019 (we reference this as the 2019 wave, for brevity), of which the authors were members. The projects were fielded in Belgium, Canada, and Israel in 2015 and in Belgium, Canada, Germany, and Switzerland in 2018-2019. In both projects, we conducted hour-long, in-person interviews with elected politicians. For more information on the procedure used to contact and interview politicians, see the Supporting Information (SI), Section 2.

Our effective sample consists of 893 politicians. In Belgium, we interviewed members of the Federal Chamber of Representatives and members of the regional parliaments. In Canada, we interviewed members of the Federal House of Commons and the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. Because we returned to these legislatures in both projects, some Belgian and Canadian politicians were interviewed twice. In Germany (2018-2019), we interviewed members of the Bundestag. In Israel (2015), we interviewed members of the Knesset, Israel’s national (and only) parliament. In Switzerland (2018-2019), we interviewed legislators from both chambers of the Swiss Federal Assembly and from the Cantonal Legislatures of Berne and Geneva. Response rates varied substantially by country³; full figures are reported in Table

³Belgium and Switzerland represent notable positive outliers compared to our other country cases, and also when benchmarking against typical response rates in politician surveys (Bailer, 2014; Walgrave and Joly, 2018). At least in Belgium, the high response rate is likely the result of unusual personal accessibility by Belgian politicians (e.g., their personal cell numbers are readily available online, and they would often answer them themselves), whereas in the other countries recruitment had to be made through staffers and email requests. The differences in response

2. Our sample is strongly heterogeneous on respondents' partisanship, experience, and seniority and includes members of all major governing and opposition parties in each country. Full details on the per-country partisan composition of our sample are reported in the SI (Section 6).

As is immediately evident, our sample is comprised of politicians from established parliamentary democracies, where elected representatives play a central role in policymaking, budgeting, and government control. Within the context of parliamentary democracies, these country cases allow for substantial variation in terms of federalism (federal–unitary), electoral systems (majoritarian-proportional), and the political importance of geographic dispersion. We certainly do not claim that this is an entirely generalizable sample of politicians. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of existing non-elite studies on personality and policy positions were conducted in established democracies, and our design is therefore well-positioned to provide a directly comparable extension of these findings to the population of elected officials.

Importantly, while the multi-country design used here maximizes statistical power by including as many politicians as the resources in these two projects allowed to recruit, we do not attempt to make claims regarding if and how our relationships of interest manifest in different countries or legislatures. First, from an empirical standpoint (as is described below), our findings are remarkably consistent across cases. Second, country-specific idiosyncrasies, differences in policy items used, and smaller per-country sample sizes (often owing not just to response rates but also

rates might also reflect overall norms regarding research participation, differential workloads, and, importantly, variation in individual disposition towards participation that could correlate with personality. However, we see this is a relatively minor inference risk given our design, as we focus on a pooled analysis of politicians from all countries, and also because our sampling efforts did lead to a well-balanced set of respondents in each country in terms of partisanship, roles, and other features that could potentially be correlated with skewed personality trait levels.

to the absolute sizes of chambers) result in a limited ability to test comparative claims on sources of between-country differences, insofar as these differences exist. Yet this design, we believe, is exceptionally well-suited for assessing the broader, individual-level relationships between elite personality and policy positions.

Country	Wave	Study N	Parliament N	Response Rate	Proportion Female	Mean Age	Mean Tenure
Belgium	2015	231	391	59%	36%	46.40	7.54
	2019	281	421	67%	33%	50.15	11.33
Canada	2015	71	415	17%	31%	53.42	8.28
	2019	71	462	15%	38%	52.55	6.89
Germany	2019	74	709	10%	26%	52.12	8.5
Israel	2015	47	120	39%	30%	52.53	5.36
Switzerland	2019	303	495	61%	34%	51.63	8.73

Table 2: Sample descriptive statistics. Proportion female, mean age, and mean tenure values are for the interviewed politicians. Overall study N is lower than the summation of individual country-case N because some politicians in Belgium and Canada participated in both waves. See SI (Section 3) for detailed notes per country.

Country	Wave	Extra- version	Agreeab- leness	Conscient- iousness	Openness to Experience	Emotional Stability	N Econ. Items	N Soc. Items
Belgium	2015	.66 (.21)	.6 (.18)	.63 (.23)	.61 (.22)	.7 (.19)	2	4
	2019	.62 (.24)	.6 (.18)	.59 (.25)	.64 (.2)	.66 (.21)	3	2
Canada	2015	.63 (.28)	.63 (.22)	.70 (.24)	.68 (.21)	.75 (.18)	4	2
	2019	.66 (.26)	.65 (.18)	.7 (.22)	.74 (.19)	.72 (.18)	3	4
Germany	2019	.62 (.2)	.55 (.2)	.71 (.21)	.68 (.21)	.76 (.16)	2	7
Israel	2015	.51 (.25)	.49 (.18)	.76 (.25)	.66 (.22)	.72 (.18)	4	2
Switzerland	2019	.61 (.22)	.58 (.19)	.72 (.22)	.68 (.18)	.71 (.21)	4	5

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for main variables of interest. Values are means for politicians’ Big Five personality traits. Standard deviations reported in parentheses. Last two columns report the number of policy items comprising the scale in each country.

2.2 Measuring Elite Personality

Across disciplines and time periods, by far the most widely used approach for measuring the Big Five is asking study subjects to provide self-assessments of their own personality traits (Gerber et al., 2011; John et al., 2008). Obtaining personality self-reports from a large sample of sitting politicians is a lot harder than from ordinary citizens, however, since public figures may be reluctant to share such personal information and are generally hard to access for research purposes (Ramey et al., 2017; Rice et al., 2020). Nonetheless, a growing number of studies have been successful in gathering personality self-reports from elites (Amsalem et al., 2018; Best, 2011; Caprara et al., 2003; Dietrich et al., 2012; Hanania, 2017; Joly et al., 2018;

Nørgaard and Klemmensen, 2019).⁴

The fact that we interviewed all politicians face-to-face enabled us to ensure that the politicians themselves answered the personality questions (and not, say, their staffers). Since interview length was typically heavily schedule-constrained, and since our survey contained multiple additional questions, we deploy a short measure of the Big Five personality traits—the Ten-Item Personality Inventory (TIPI)—that is nevertheless carefully validated (Gosling et al., 2003) and has been used in numerous studies in political science (e.g., Gerber et al., 2013), including, recently, with political elites (e.g., Joly et al., 2018). Administering a longer Big Five questionnaire, while arguably increasing measurement reliability, would have demanded a much longer meeting time and likely drastically reduced our ability to obtain a large enough sample of elected officials.

The TIPI records responses to personality items on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (Disagree strongly) to 7 (Agree strongly). Responses to each pair of items are averaged to create a trait score, which we rescale to a 0–1 range to facilitate interpretation. Full question wording of the TIPI and details of the scale construction are available in the SI (Section 4). Table 3 presents summary statistics for our Big Five variables.

Social desirability is naturally a concern when asking sitting politicians to self-report on topics such as their personality traits, which may reflect on their character and how they are perceived by potential voters. That being said, we are confident

⁴Other studies of political elites use indirect methods for inferring their personality. Two commonly used approaches have been (1) asking experts to evaluate elite personality (e.g., Rice et al., 2020) and (2) using text-based methods to automatically extract traits from public speeches (e.g., Ramey et al., 2017). Even though indirect inference is advantageous in some regards—for example, it allows studying the personality of historical leaders—it is also limited in important ways. For example, experts evaluate elite personality “from a distance,” and speeches are often written by speechwriters.

that the responses we elicited are not systematically skewed by such considerations. First, we repeatedly brought up the anonymous and confidential nature of politicians' responses to the survey in general and to the personality questions in particular. That is, politicians were repeatedly informed that their responses would never be made public in a way that can be tied directly to them. Second, the Big Five instrument we used is, in our opinion, especially unwelcoming for strategic responses because each item consists of two disjoint (in fact, contradictory) descriptions, which make it harder for respondents to directly 'game' the module. Finally, if the responses we gathered from elites were strongly skewed towards what may appear as more favorable placements (e.g., appearing more open), we would expect to see reduced variance on these personality dimensions compared to what is typically obtained with citizen samples. However, we find that the dispersion of scores on each of the five dimensions is very similar to that obtained in non-elite samples: standard deviations in our sample of politicians range from 0.18 to 0.28, and these figures are highly similar to those seen in, for example, Gerber et al.'s influential study of citizens (Gerber et al., 2010).

It should also be noted that brief personality instruments, such as the TIPI, often lead to greater measurement error compared to longer batteries that measure the same traits with more items. Consequently, researchers employing such instruments may obtain null results for some traits not because of a true null in the population but due to attenuation of true relationships (Bakker and Leles, 2018). This is certainly relevant to the interpretation of null results in our study. Despite our large sample of close to 900 elected politicians, an even larger sample (or, alternatively, a longer personality battery) may be needed to evaluate whether the weaker, non-significant associations we observe between some traits and our outcomes of interest

reflect measurement error or the absence of an effect in the population.

2.3 Measuring Elite Policy Positions

Scholarship on how political ideology maps onto policy positions provides compelling evidence that ideology is differently linked to two distinct substantive policy domains. The first consists of economic issues, such as taxation or government spending, and the second covers social (sometimes called cultural) issues, such as gay marriage, immigration, or abortion (Ellis and Stimson, 2012; Malka et al., 2019). This conceptual distinction also dominates existing research on the relationship between personality and the political preferences of citizens, where the predictive role of the Big Five dimensions is commonly estimated separately for each policy domain (e.g., Fatke, 2017; Gerber et al., 2010). As our study builds on and extends this prior work, our measure of elites' policy positions makes the same distinction.⁵ During the interview, we asked politicians to rate their level of agreement with policy proposals on a variety of economic and social issues, and we estimate the relationship between personality traits and each domain independently.⁶

The issues we studied represent political debates that were salient in each country at the time of the survey. For example, to gauge economic positions, politicians

⁵At least in our sample, this distinction is also empirically supported. The correlation between the economic and social policy positions of the politicians in our sample is $r = .46$ in the 2015 wave, and $r = .53$ in the 2019 wave. This suggests that while political elites display considerable ideological consistency across policy domains (as one would expect), their positions on each of these dimensions are far from being conceptually identical, and certainly do not perfectly overlap.

⁶Participants also provided responses on additional items that varied by country and did not map onto economic or social issue domains, such as policies on federalism, administrative policies, and foreign relations. Although some prior work has looked at personality and foreign policy attitudes (e.g., Schoen and Schumann, 2007), these topics are not part of the theoretical framework employed in most existing studies of personality and policy positions. From a more technical standpoint, in this study, the foreign policy items do not constitute a comprehensive enough set of statements that would allow for a meaningful pooled estimation. Therefore, we do not use them in the analysis reported here.

in Canada were asked in 2015 to rate their agreement with (among other items) the following statement: “Wealthier people should pay more taxes,” and in Israel in 2015 one of the statements on economic policy was: “The current minimum wage rate in Israel should be increased.” As for social policy positions, statements included such policy proposals as “Illegal immigrants must be expelled, even if they are integrated here” (Belgium - 2015), or “My Canton should spend more for the integration of asylum seekers” (Switzerland - 2019). The statements were also heterogeneous in their directionality: agreeing with some statements represented a liberal preference, and with others, a conservative preference. The composition of per-domain statements in each country was not always balanced on their directionality (for example, in Israel both social policy statements had a conservative direction, and in Germany both economic statements had a liberal direction). However, the pooled sample was well-balanced on this feature, and an analysis reported in the SI (Section 9) shows that our results are robust to controlling for the liberal or conservative direction of the statements. The full list of policy statements asked in the five countries in both survey waves, as well as the question wording and rating scales used, are available in the SI (Section 5). Our surveys explicitly probed politicians’ individual opinions rather than the party line on the issues. As shown in Table 3, each MP was asked between five and nine policy questions in each wave. To ease interpretation, all responses were recoded such that higher values indicate a more liberal position, and both policy variables were standardized such that $M = 0$ and $SD = 1$.

We note that there is substantial variation between the politicians in our sample in their positions on both economic and social policy issues, and this is reflected in the distribution of policy positions we use as our main dependent variables. This is true in each country-wave case separately, as is illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, and is

unsurprising given that we recruited participants from a broad spectrum of parties in each country who are expected to hold widely divergent policy views. What is less obvious is that we observe substantial variation in policy positions between politicians *within parties*, as well: there are very few instances where politicians of the same party have closely grouped scores on either the economic or the social policy indicators, reflecting the fact that co-partisans often hold distinct and divergent positions on the issues we evaluate. Section 10 in the SI reports the distributions of within-party standard deviations on both economic and social issues in our sample. It highlights that in the vast majority of parties, within-party variation in politicians' positions is comparable in magnitude to that observed across the entire sample.

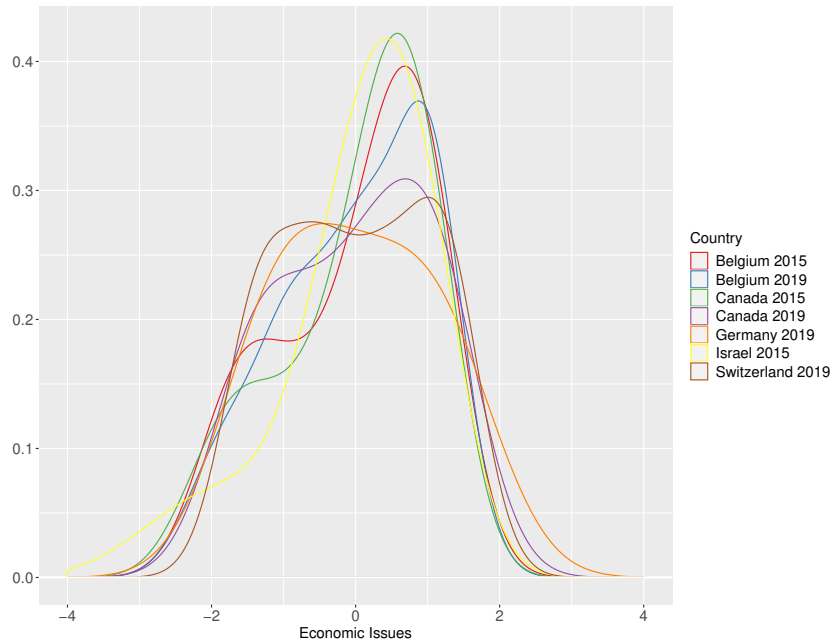


Figure 1: Distribution of politicians' policy positions on economic issues, by country and wave.

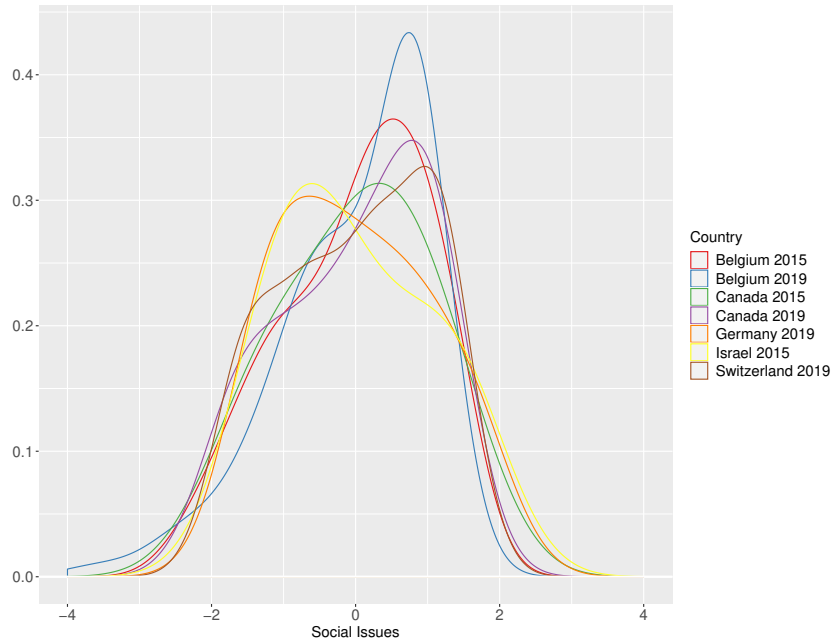


Figure 2: Distribution of politicians’ policy positions on social issues, by country and wave.

2.4 Estimation Strategy

Our analysis of the relationship between elites’ personality and their policy positions builds largely on the estimation strategy employed by Gerber et al. (2010) in their study of citizens. We estimate mixed-effects regression models in which elites’ positions are the dependent variables, and their personality traits are the main independent variables. Since the policy positions of politicians might also be determined by a variety of factors other than their personality, our models control for each politician’s gender, age, tenure (measured as years since first elected), political seniority (two dummy variables: one for being a minister and the other for being a party leader), whether the politician’s party is currently in coalition, and the survey wave (2015 or 2019).

As noted earlier, elites’ policy positions are highly likely to be strongly deter-

mined by their party affiliation, and more specifically, by the ideological platform of their party (Hanania, 2017; Joly et al., 2018). To account for variation in elites' policy positions that might be explained by party line, we used each party's Right-Left (RILE) score from the Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) dataset, which is a widely used index for estimating the ideological positions of political parties around the world (Budge et al., 2001).⁷ The SI (Section 6) presents RILE scores for political parties having at least one representative in our data. In the results section, we estimate models including and excluding party ideology scores.⁸

Our regression models have two other important features. First, to account for unmeasured characteristics of respondents that vary between countries, we include country fixed-effects, with Belgium serving as the reference category in all models. Second, since each politician has multiple values on the dependent variable (that is, each legislator provided between five and nine policy positions in each wave), we include a random intercept for politician ID. The random intercept accounts for the fact that policy positions originating from the same politician are likely to be correlated. This mixed-effect approach is advantageous as it both maximizes statistical power and prevents the loss of valuable information about legislators' ideology, which is measured here with policy statements tapping into different aspects of being liberal/conservative.⁹

⁷The RILE index computes the proportion of statements in party manifestos referring to left and right sets of categories, and subtracts the left proportion from the right proportion. To be consistent with our coding of individual politicians' policy positions, we reverse-coded the RILE index such that positive scores represent a more leftist party platform.

⁸RILE scores were missing for some parties in our sample—e.g., some Canton-level parties in Switzerland—resulting in the exclusion of these observations from models including this variable.

⁹An alternative specification choice here would be to use as the dependent variable the mean value per politician, averaged over their different positions in each of our two issue domains of interest. In such models, the unit of analysis is individual politicians rather than policy positions, resulting in a substantially reduced number of observations. In the SI (Section 9), we report linear regression models that use this setup, and find virtually identical results.

3 Results

Table 4 presents the results of our main estimation models, which include all country cases across both the 2015 and 2019 waves. Per-wave models are reported in the SI (Section 7). Models 1 and 2 estimate politicians’ degree of liberal (vs. conservative) positions on economic policy issues, while Models 3 and 4 estimate their positions on social policy issues. For both pairs of models, the first excludes party ideology scores as a control, and the second includes it. In all models, the dependent variable is coded so that higher values reflect a more liberal position on an issue.¹⁰

Our quantities of interest are the coefficients for the Big Five personality traits when predicting the policy outcome variables. Even though our models estimate the effects of all five traits on our outcomes, our substantive focus is on the two theoretical predictions outlined above: we expect Openness to Experience to be associated with more liberal policy positions, and Conscientiousness to be linked with more conservative positions. Figure 3 presents the model estimates for economic and social policy positions, based on the coefficients in Models 1 and 3, respectively. The most consistent relationship is between politicians’ levels of Openness to Experience and their preference for liberal policy positions. For both economic and social policies, moving from the bottom to the top of the Openness scale is predictive of about a 2/3 standard deviation increase in politicians’ liberalism on those issues. This is a highly significant result.¹¹ Importantly, when we include party ideology

¹⁰In the SI (Section 9), we report the results of robustness checks that use alternative specifications to control for party ideology, such as party fixed-effects, party-family groups, and different party-nested models. The results reported here strongly hold in all cases. We also report a robustness check where the models are stripped of all non-Big Five predictors other than country fixed effects, to evaluate whether the results might be impacted by controls that are potentially endogenous to personality, such as sex and age. Here, too, the original results strongly hold.

¹¹For comparison, the same estimation with citizens performed by Gerber et al. (2010) found effects of about 1.2 and 1.4 standard deviations of Openness to Experience on economic and social policy positions, respectively—about twice as large as the effects we observe with politicians.

in the models, the impact of Openness to Experience on both economic and social positions is cut to about 0.5 (economic policies) and 0.3 standard deviations (social policies) in the liberal direction. This, however, remains a significant relationship in both cases.

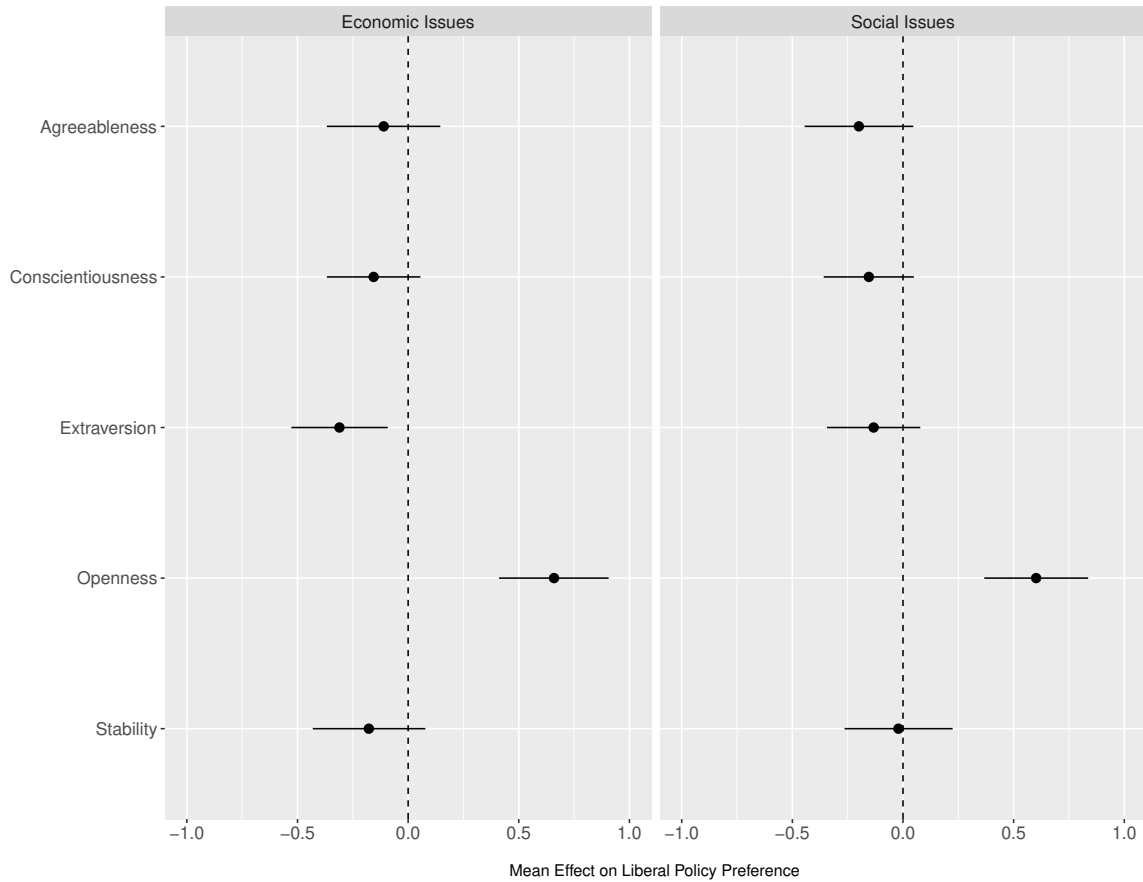


Figure 3: The relationship between politicians' Big Five personality traits and their economic and social policy positions. Dots are coefficients obtained from mixed-effects Models 1 and 3 reported in Table 4. Lines are 95% confidence intervals.

This result demonstrates that, as we had anticipated, the association between Openness to Experience and more liberal positions is not limited to non-elites. Politicians who self-report high levels of Openness consistently have more liberal positions on economic and social issues, even when controlling for a long list of

other variables predictive of liberal positions. This result is highly consistent across country cases, as Figure 4 illustrates: in all but one case (Israel, social policies), Openness is positively correlated with more liberal policy positions.¹² The relationship between Openness to Experience and liberal policy preferences appears to survive both the personality selection funnel into elected office, which results in individuals who are overall higher on this trait, and the sorting effect of party ideology.

¹²Importantly, statistical significance levels for these relationships are substantially reduced when estimating by-country models given the much smaller sample sizes. For a similar per-country plot of the estimates that includes confidence intervals, see the SI (Section 8).

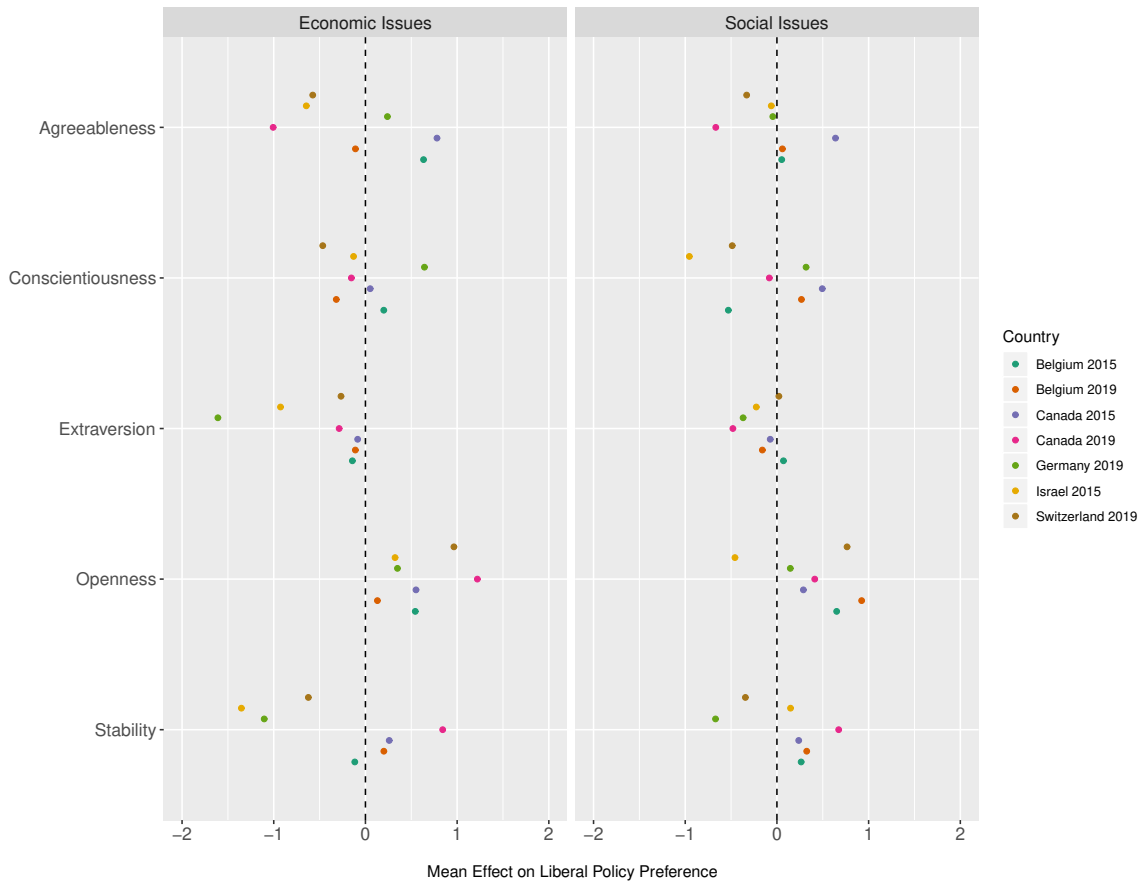


Figure 4: The relationship between politicians’ Big Five personality traits and their economic and social policy positions, by country case and wave. Dots are coefficients obtained from country-specific mixed-effects models that are reported in the SI (Section 8).

The remaining personality dimensions are not as strongly or consistently related to politicians’ policy positions. Conscientiousness, which is highly predictive of conservative positions among non-elites, is not consistently associated with either the economic or social policy positions of politicians, although in all of the pooled models the coefficients for Conscientiousness are negative (in the case of conservative social positions, the coefficient is also significant, though only when party ideology is accounted for). This may suggest that in reality, this trait might be negatively, though weakly, associated with conservatism among elites. Given that we are ob-

serving very small effect sizes for three of four Conscientiousness coefficients (effects of < 0.16 standard deviations), even our large sample is likely insufficiently powered to determine whether this is a case of an especially weak real relationship, as opposed to a true null. Regardless of the interpretation, contrary to our expectations, the strong and consistent relationship between Conscientiousness and holding conservative policy positions that is documented among citizens does not appear to replicate with politicians.

Somewhat more surprisingly, we do find a quite strong negative relationship between Extraversion and economic policy positions. This pattern is especially intriguing. While some scattered findings exist regarding the association between Extraversion and citizens' policy preferences (e.g., Bakker and Lelkes, 2018), this link is not found consistently across studies, nor is it predicted by existing theory (Fatke, 2017; Gerber et al., 2010). This points, perhaps, at the existence of a more nuanced dynamic that warrants further exploration.

	Economic Policies		Social Policies	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Agreeableness	-0.110 (0.132)	0.010 (0.161)	-0.199 (0.126)	-0.159 (0.140)
Conscientiousness	-0.156 (0.109)	-0.004 (0.138)	-0.154 (0.105)	-0.381*** (0.119)
Extraversion	-0.310*** (0.112)	-0.413*** (0.135)	-0.133 (0.108)	-0.030 (0.119)
Openness	0.659*** (0.127)	0.470*** (0.149)	0.602*** (0.121)	0.331** (0.129)
Stability	-0.177 (0.131)	-0.243 (0.168)	-0.021 (0.126)	0.098 (0.147)
Canada (FE)	-0.108 (0.075)	0.041 (0.091)	-0.034 (0.073)	0.020 (0.086)
Germany (FE)	-0.077 (0.123)	0.053 (0.141)	0.018 (0.093)	-0.096 (0.111)
Israel (FE)	-0.143 (0.116)	0.005 (0.123)	-0.075 (0.127)	0.153 (0.127)
Switzerland (FE)	0.174*** (0.065)	0.122 (0.105)	0.161** (0.065)	0.073 (0.101)
Female	0.335*** (0.054)	0.219*** (0.068)	0.354*** (0.051)	0.191*** (0.058)
Age	0.001 (0.003)	0.004 (0.003)	-0.003 (0.002)	0.001 (0.003)
Tenure	0.005 (0.004)	0.0002 (0.004)	0.002 (0.003)	-0.005 (0.004)
Minister	0.108 (0.187)	0.202 (0.234)	0.197 (0.175)	0.303 (0.191)
Party Leader	-0.138 (0.162)	-0.158 (0.176)	-0.079 (0.156)	-0.099 (0.153)
In Coalition	-0.394*** (0.053)	-0.355*** (0.071)	-0.167*** (0.050)	-0.157*** (0.060)
2019 Study	-0.096** (0.047)	-0.028 (0.095)	-0.052 (0.047)	0.193** (0.089)
Party Ideology Score		0.384*** (0.037)		0.421*** (0.033)
Constant	0.149 (0.193)	-0.155 (0.233)	0.052 (0.181)	-0.108 (0.197)
Observations	2,615	1,308	3,035	1,648
Log Likelihood	-3,465.625	-1,687.303	-4,138.564	-2,207.448

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 4: Mixed-effects models estimating the relationship between politicians' Big Five personality traits and their policy positions. Standard errors reported in parentheses. Politician-level random effects are included in all models.

Finally, we find no evidence of a relationship between politicians' Agreeableness and Emotional Stability and their policy positions. This is in line with the mixed findings in previous studies on the link between these traits and citizens' policy positions. That the per-country coefficients for Agreeableness and Emotional Stability are noisily spread around zero might serve as further suggestive evidence that these personality dimensions have a true null relationship with politicians' policy issues, as opposed to an attenuated weak correlation. Yet, as we discuss below, we cannot rule out that this is instead a product of measurement error introduced by the TIPI instrument.

4 Discussion

The findings reported in this article demonstrate that a specific personality trait—the degree to which individuals exhibit Openness to Experience—is strongly associated with politicians' likelihood of adopting liberal positions on both economic and social policy issues. This pattern holds under a host of political and demographic controls known to condition policy preferences, and remains substantively large and statistically significant even after taking party ideology into account. The results are also remarkably consistent across our five country cases, and obtain in both a 2015 and a 2019 study under different question wordings and measurement scales.

These results make three main contributions. First, they advance our understanding of how politicians' personalities shape their attitudes and preferences by going beyond the existing link that has been documented between the Big Five and the overall ideology of politicians (Best, 2011; Caprara et al., 2003; Joly et al., 2018; Ramey et al., 2017). Focusing on how personality shapes specific policy positions is crucial because politicians' concrete positions feed directly into the legislation they

draft and vote on, and on other policy instruments and outcomes, in ways that often deviate from their overall ideological framework (Ansolabehere et al., 2001; Tavits, 2009). Moreover, politicians are often more readily evaluated by citizens based on their expressed issue positions, with concrete policies even used by citizens as a reliable cue on politicians' overall ideology, rather than the other way around (Giebler et al., 2019). Indeed, we find associations between personality and economic and social policy positions that are nuanced and deviate substantially from the links observed between politicians' Big Five traits and their overall party ideologies.

Second, our results show that existing findings on personality and non-elites' policy positions only partly replicate with elected representatives. In line with expectations derived from past research, Openness to Experience, which is also the strongest and most consistent correlate of liberal policy preferences among non-elites (Gerber et al., 2011; Mondak, 2010), remains strongly and consistently associated with politicians' positions. But Conscientiousness, which theory predicts should be associated with greater support for conservative policies, shows a significant association with elites' policy positions in only one case out of four (i.e., the model predicting social positions while accounting for party ideology; see Table 4). Extraversion appears to be associated with politicians' economically conservative positions, a relationship not found in most studies among non-elites, while Agreeableness and Emotional Stability have a null relationship with both the economic and social policy positions of politicians. That only the strongest and most consistent personality trait related to the policy positions of citizens displays the same tendency with politicians is arguably indicative of how dominant of a predictor it is, even in the face of strong competing factors such as party socialization, strategic conduct, and selection effects. It is far from obvious in our minds that even Openness would survive the

political selection funnel and remain a relevant correlate of elite policy positions. In that sense, our findings with policymakers highlight that even for expert, high-level political elites, early-formed and arguably stable personality features are a central determinant of choices that they have every reason to be strategic and calculated about.

The null findings we document regarding the association between Conscientiousness and elites' policy positions warrant further attention, as they diverge quite sharply from past research. One possibility is that our failure to confirm this hypothesis is the result of insufficient statistical power. Assuming the effect of Conscientiousness on policy positions is real but smaller than that of Openness (as some studies have shown; see, e.g., Gerber et al., 2010), a larger sample of politicians may have been needed to reliably detect it. Another possibility we cannot exclude, however, is that these results represent a true null effect in the population. As shown in Figure 4, the by-country effects of Conscientiousness are randomly scattered around zero, with about half of them being negative and half positive. Moreover, as the models in Table 4 reveal, adding a control for party ideology has an inconsistent influence on the Conscientiousness estimate, which becomes zero in the case of economic policies and a significant negative effect in the case of social policies. These complex dynamics may indicate that Conscientiousness either has no meaningful relationship with politicians' policy positions, or that this association only manifests under very specific theoretical conditions, such as in certain countries (e.g., Switzerland) or for certain types of policies (e.g., social ones). Finally, it might also be that reverse causality mutes the impact of this particular trait on elite positions. As was recently suggested by Bakker et al. (2021), variations in political preferences may themselves be predictive of changes in one's self-reported personality traits. Per-

haps taking clear ideological stances on issues makes politicians perceive themselves as systematically more or less conscientious in a way that attenuates this trait's subsequent impact on their stated policy positions.

Third, these findings expand our understanding of how personality traits relate to legislative behavior. Individual-level characteristics of politicians have been shown to predict a host of outcomes that are less constrained by partisan ideological sorting, such as productivity and progressive ambition (Ramey et al., 2017). In showing here that specific personality traits are strongly associated with politicians' policy positions, and that they do so above and beyond their partisan ideology, this study points to new, arguably even more direct ways through which individual-level characteristics of officeholders shape the outcomes of the legislative process. Exploring the potential long-term, downstream effects on policymaking created by politicians possessing specific personality characteristics is beyond the scope of this paper, and is a promising future research agenda.

While this study takes an important first step toward clarifying the personality correlates of elites' policy positions, future research can complement it in several important ways. One such way would be determining the causal ordering of elite personality and policy positions, possibly with a panel design measuring these two variables with the same sample of politicians at multiple time points. This would enable to identify whether in-office changes in personality happen, if so, whether they occur in predictable ways, and whether they are associated with factors like ideology, tenure, electoral safety, and seniority. Second, our results can and should be complemented by studies employing longer personality batteries with elite subjects (Bakker and Lelkes, 2018; Schumacher and Zettler, 2019). Instruments employing more than two items to measure each personality trait can reduce measurement error, thus al-

lowing an assessment of whether some of the null results reported here—especially for Conscientiousness—might reflect true, albeit weaker, relationships between the personality and policy positions of politicians. Third, future research could explore in greater depth the potential implications of differential response rates of politicians to participate in studies that evaluate their personalities. While the differences in response rates we observe appear to be mostly evident at the country level (whereas party affiliation and seniority levels are quite well balanced within each country), there is good evidence that participation in research is partly correlated with personality (Marcus and Schütz, 2005), and we cannot rule out personality-based selection effects as one of the factors explaining the wide range of response rates across our surveyed countries. Whether such effects exist and matter for the conclusions drawn here on personality and ideological preferences is beyond the scope of the current paper but is clearly an important question for future work.

More broadly, the findings reported here open the door for natural follow-up questions: are the personalities of politicians also predictive of their voting and *public* position-taking on the issues we examined? Does the fact that people with certain personality traits are more likely to self-select into elected politics also create a skewed policy preference structure among elites, above and beyond other factors that result in politicians having distinct preferences compared to citizens (Broockman and Skovron, 2018)?

Finally, we stress that further research on the link between personality and policy positions among elites is needed. We focused here on politicians' economic and social policy positions. Future efforts can examine whether personality traits also condition elites' positions in other important domains, such as foreign policy (Schoen and Schumann, 2007). From a conceptual standpoint, our focus has been on the es-

established Big Five typology. But there is accumulating evidence on the value of the six-factor (HEXACO) model of personality in explaining political behavior, and it is highly likely that this typology will also benefit future research focusing on elites (see Schumacher and Zettler (2019) for an application with candidates for office). From a generalizability perspective, our study has been conducted with politicians in established, Western parliamentary democracies. Whether the personalities of politicians in different institutional settings—developing democracies, presidential systems, and non-democracies—are similarly predictive of their positions is an important open question. Exploring it can shed light on less well-understood mechanisms explaining if and why these systems produce systematically different policy outcomes.

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