The psychological roots of populist voting: Evidence from the United States, the Netherlands and Germany

BERT N. BAKKER, MATTHIJS ROODUIJN & GIJS SCHUMACHER
University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Abstract. What are the psychological roots of support for populist parties or outfits such as the Tea Party, the Dutch Party for Freedom or Germany's Left Party? Populist parties have as a common denominator that they employ an anti-establishment message, which they combine with some 'host' ideology. Building on the congruency model of political preference, it is to be expected that a voter's personality should match with the message and position of his or her party. This article theorises that a low score on the personality trait Agreeableness matches the anti-establishment message and should predict voting for populist parties. Evidence is found for this hypothesis in the United States, the Netherlands and Germany. The relationship between low Agreeableness and voting for populist parties is robust, controlling for other personality traits, authoritarianism, sociodemographic characteristics and ideology. Thus, explanations of the success of populism should take personality traits into account.

Keywords: populism; personality; Agreeableness; voting behaviour

Introduction

The 4 January 2014 issue of *The Economist* featured a floating tea pot carrying three European populist politicians accompanied by the comment 'Europe's Tea Parties'.[1] The journal's leading article describes how, on both sides of the Atlantic, populist parties[2] are experiencing electoral success and gaining political clout. Tea Party candidates, the Dutch *Partij voor de Vrijheid* (Party for Freedom, PVV), the *Dansk Folkeparti* (Danish People's Party, DF), the French *Front National* (National Front, FN) and Germany's *Die Linke* (Left Party) are all examples of successful populists (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). These parties differ in terms of ideology. Some are pro-gay marriage, while others abhor it. Some worship the invisible hand of the market, but others sanctify the universal welfare state. The essential common denominator of these parties is their anti-establishment message (Rooduijn 2014), which they combine with a 'host' ideology – and which depends on the particular political context. Thus, what these parties have in common is their portrayal of the political elite – in Washington, The Hague, Berlin and so on – as evil, working for their own gain and disinterested in the common people (Mudde 2004).

This anti-establishment message explains some of the electoral success of populist parties, as political cynicism (Bergh 2004; Schumacher & Rooduijn 2013) and populist anti-establishment attitudes (Akkerman et al. 2014) are identified along with ideological proximity (Van der Brug et al. 2000) and low social and economic status (Arzheimer & Carter 2006) as explanatory factors of populist voting.

According to political psychology research, ideology and cynicism are rooted in personality (Jost et al. 2003; Mondak & Halperin 2008; Gerber et al. 2010). The *congruency*

model of political preference holds that voters seek politicians and parties similar to their own personality, and that successful politicians 'speak the language of personality … by identifying and conveying those individual characteristics that are most appealing … to a particular constituency' (Caprara & Zimbardo 2004: 581). We expand this argument and theorise that a person is drawn to a populist party when the anti-establishment message of this party, and its leader, is congruent with one's personality. When assessing personality, researchers often use the Big Five personality traits, which is a taxonomy of relatively stable patterns of thinking, feeling and behaviour that identifies five traits: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extroversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism (Digman 1990). We push this research one step further by hypothesising that voting for populists is rooted in low Agreeableness. Because low agreeable individuals are inclined to be highly sceptical of the behaviour of others, they are highly sensitive to populist parties' anti-establishment message and therefore more inclined to support these parties.

We test our argument with survey evidence from the United States, the Netherlands and Germany. Together, these countries have a diverse set of successful populists: the anti-government Tea Party in the United States, the welfare chauvinist and anti-immigrant PVV in the Netherlands and the left-wing *Die Linke* in Germany. We report negative associations between Agreeableness and support for each of these populist parties. We control for a host of additional interpretations – ideology, socioeconomic background, authoritarianism and the other Big Five traits – but find systematic evidence for an *independent* effect of Agreeableness on populist voting. This is an important finding because we demonstrate: (1) that populist voters do not have an authoritarian personality such as supporters of fascist outfits; and (2) that populist voting is not irrational protest voting as some have claimed (Billiet & Witte 1995) because protest is an action congruent with one's personality. Hence, the populist vote (for a right- or left-wing populist party or movement) can only fully be understood once the personality of the voter is taken into consideration.

What is populism?

Scholars increasingly agree on a substantive, 'ideational' definition of populism (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2012) because prototypical populists do not have a particular style of practising politics or a specific form of organisation in common. Instead, it is the *message* they express that distinguishes them from other parties (Rooduijn 2014). Specifically, populism is 'an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people' (Mudde 2004: 543). What exactly is meant by 'the people' or 'the elite' depends on the particular political context within which a populist party rallies (Canovan 1981). The elite – arrogant, greedy, lazy, corrupt, unresponsive to ordinary people and absorbed by self-interest (Mudde 2004) – might be a political elite (politicians and parties), an economic elite (bankers and 'the rich'), a cultural elite (academics and writers), a media elite (journalists) or a legal elite (judges).

According to this definition, populism is neither left nor right, neither progressive nor conservative. Populism can be combined with many different 'host ideologies'. The Tea Party – with its romantic vision of the original, lean state – combines conservatism with

an anti-establishment message (Parker & Barreto 2013; Skocpol & Williamson 2013). On the website www.Teaparty.org (accessed 6 July 2015) it is claimed that citizens have become increasingly frustrated with 'politics as usual'. Indeed, '[u]nderlying many specific Tea Party worries is distrust of politicians, the sense that the political class is not responsive or accountable to "average Americans"' (Williamson et al. 2011: 34). The PVV in the Netherlands criticises the elite for its multiculturalism and for selling out national interests to the benefit of Brussels or immigrants. For example, in its 2006 election manifesto the party writes that the 'political elite systematically ignores citizens' interests and problems' (Party for Freedom 2006: 1). According to Vossen (2011) the party leader, Geert Wilders, has increasingly adopted populist rhetoric since 2006. Germany's *Die Linke* denounces, in its most recent election manifesto, 'elitist backroom politics' (*Die Linke* 2013: 49). According to Hough and Koß (2009: 78), the party 'regularly talks in the language of elites betraying the population at large, and it is frequently disdainful of the wider political process'. Some populist parties change over time. In the 1980s and 1990s the French *Front National* combined nationalist appeals with a neoliberal outlook (Kitschelt 1995), but has now taken over the welfare chauvinism of its successful Dutch counterpart (Schumacher & Kersbergen 2014). In sum, whether populists exclude outsiders, or whether they endorse a strong welfare state is dependent on the 'host ideology' to which the populist party attaches itself.

Previous research has shown that the message of populist parties indeed differs from the messages of mainstream parties. Based on a systematic content analysis of election manifestos of parties in five Western European countries, Rooduijn et al. (2014) demonstrate that populist parties are more inclined to make the claim that the 'good' people are exploited by an 'evil' elite than mainstream parties. In sum, all prototypical populist parties have in common that they express a specific anti-establishment message but differ in the host ideology they have adopted (Mudde 2004). Personality should thus match with this anti-establishment message *across* countries.

Personality and voting for populist parties

To analyse the link between personality and populism we make use of the 'congruency principle', which holds that voters 'select politicians whose traits match their own traits' (Caprara & Zimbardo 2004: 581). This model assumes congruency between a voter's personality and the image of the party and the leader she or he votes for. On this basis, we expect to find congruency between a voter's personality traits and the *message* expressed by the populist.[3] Voters need information about parties and politicians in order to make the connection between their own personality and their vote choice. Caprara and Zimbardo (2004: 584) explain that 'a crucial skill for politicians is learning to speak the language of personality – namely, to navigate properly in the domain of personality attributes by identifying and conveying those individual characteristics that are most appealing at a certain time to a particular constituency'. In other words, politicians need to *communicate* those individual characteristics that appeal to a specific group of voters by sending a message congruent with these features.

'A similar conception' of the congruence principle is – according to Caprara and Zimbardo (2004: 590) – the elective affinity model introduced by Jost et al. (2009). The elective affinity metaphor puts forward that there is a 'functional match' between the

symbolic nature and substance of a belief system and the psychological dispositions of their supporters. Thus, individuals support a party if their personality matches with the party's – ideological – message.

With the anti-establishment message as a central characteristic of populist parties, we expect that for populist party supporters the content, structure or symbols of this anti-establishment message should be congruent with some personality trait and, accordingly, lead to support for a populist party. To develop this prediction we turn to a commonly used categorisation of psychological dispositions: the Big Five model of personality. Originating in the lexical tradition of personality psychology, the Big Five identifies five continuous psychological dispositions that describe differences in the temperament and behaviour of individuals: Openness, Conscientiousness, Extroversion, Agreeableness and Neuroticism (Digman 1990). We use the Big Five model of personality because these five dispositions encapsulate a wide variety of individual differences, have a genetic component, develop in early childhood and are relatively stable over time (Mondak & Halperin 2008). These dispositions are correlated with, among many other things, political attitudes (Jost et al. 2003; Gerber et al. 2010) and voting behaviour (Bakker et al. 2015c; Barbaranelli et al. 2007; Schoen & Schumann 2007).

We expect that the anti-establishment message is congruent with individuals scoring low on Agreeableness – a trait characterised by altruism, trust towards others, soft-heartedness, modesty, tolerance and cooperativeness (Costa et al. 1991). Individuals that score low on Agreeableness are thus egoistic, distrusting towards others, intolerant, uncooperative and express antagonism towards others (McCrae 1996: 329). In the political domain, low agreeable individuals are more distrusting of politicians (Mondak & Halperin 2008) and politics (Dinesen et al. 2014), less efficacious (Mondak & Halperin 2008) and more likely to believe in conspiracy theories (Swami et al. 2010). The populist anti-establishment message – accusing the political elite of incompetence, insubordination and profiteering at the expense of the common people – matches a distrusting, tough-minded, cynical and intolerant personality.

Various studies indeed verify that persuasive appeals are especially effective when the message resonates with psychological dispositions such as personality (Hirsh et al. 2012). For instance, authoritarians that receive a threatening message express less tolerance towards out-group members (Feldman & Stenner 1997), are more likely to vote (Lavine et al. 1999) and are more likely to process information in a biased manner (Lavine et al. 2005). These studies suggest that matches between persuasive messages and personality lead to strong responses from the recipient.

To conclude, we hypothesise that individuals low on Agreeableness are likely to be susceptible to populist anti-establishment messages, and therefore they should be more likely to support populist parties.

Additional explanations of voting for populist parties

We now consider four additional explanations of the relationship between personality and voting for populist parties: right-wing ideology; authoritarianism and social dominance orientation; the other Big Five traits; and socioeconomic background. The first explanation is that the low agreeable are right-wing and therefore vote for a populist party. Individuals with

a social-conservative ideology have been described as low agreeable (Gerber et al. 2010). Also, the low agreeable are more likely to vote for right-wing parties (Schoen & Schumann 2007). However, not every populist party hosts a right-wing, conservative agenda. Populist parties combine an anti-establishment message with a 'host' ideology that could be right-wing (Tea Party) or radical left-wing (*Die Linke*), conservative (Danish People's Party) or neoliberal (Front National in the 1980s). We therefore expect right-wing ideology to predict populist voting for radical-right populist parties but not for populists with another host ideology. Following this reasoning, we expect low Agreeableness to explain populist party voting across countries, even when controlling for ideology.

Second, the roots of the study of personality lie in explaining why people supported fascist parties and condoned widespread violence against their own population (Adorno et al. 1950). This research is about authoritarian personalities (Feldman 2003). As argued in our section on populism, a populist party might have authoritarian standpoints, but this is not the common denominator of populist parties. Indeed, some studies find a positive correlation between (right-wing) authoritarianism and support for populist parties such as the Tea Party in the United States (Arceneaux & Nicholson 2012) as well populist parties in Denmark and Switzerland (Dunn 2015). However, authoritarianism is not correlated with support for populist parties in Austria, the Netherlands and Belgium (Dunn 2015). Conceptually, a tension exists between the anti-establishment core of populism and authoritarianism. It is difficult to see how an individual is obedient to authority by supporting a party that opposes the authorities. In sum, authoritarianism matches with the 'host' ideology of some populist parties, but there is a tension with the anti-establishment posture – the common denominator of populist parties.

Third, we add the full set of other personality traits from the Big Five model to control for other potential associations with populist parties. Openness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and to a lesser degree Extroversion, have been associated with political ideology (Jost et al. 2003; Mondak & Halperin 2008; Gerber et al. 2010). We therefore expect to find an association between these four personality traits and support for populist parties when we do not control for ideology. If we analyse voting behaviour with personality traits *and* ideology, we expect that the effect of personality traits disappears because it is mediated by ideology. We briefly discuss the association between the four Big Five traits, ideology and populism. *Openness* is a trait characterised by a preference for new activities, ideas and the willingness to reconsider held beliefs. Low levels of Openness relate to conservatism and voting for right-wing parties (Jost et al. 2003; Schoen & Schumann 2007; Gerber et al. 2010). Specifically, we expect to observe a negative association between Openness and support for populist parties with a right-wing 'host' ideology (i.e., the Tea Party and the PVV), whereas we expect a positive association between Openness and populist parties with a left-wing 'host' ideology (i.e., *Die Linke*). *Conscientiousness* is characterised by a strong preference for order, structure, self-discipline and achievement striving. Conscientious individuals have conservative attitudes in both the economic and the social domains of politics (Gerber et al. 2010). Therefore, we expect a positive association between Conscientiousness and support for the Tea Party, as well as the PVV, but a negative association with *Die Linke* if we do not control for ideology. *Neuroticism* relates to the experience of negative affect such as anger, anxiety and depression as well as self-consciousness and the experience of stress. Neuroticism correlates positively to voting for the Democrats (Barbaranelli et al.

2007), support for political 'parties that offer shelter against material and cultural challenges' (Schoen & Schumann 2007: 492) and economic liberalism (Gerber et al. 2010). Therefore, we expect a negative association between Neuroticism and support for populist parties with a right-wing 'host' ideology, but a positive association between Neuroticism and populist parties with a left-wing 'host' ideology. *Extroversion* relates to excitement-seeking, outgoing and social behaviour, and is inconsistently associated with voting and ideology (Mondak & Halperin 2008; Gerber et al. 2010).

Fourth, voting for populists has often been linked to sociodemographic characteristics of voters, such as age, education and gender. Typical populist voters are both older and younger, lowly educated and men (Arzheimer 2009). Therefore, we control for these variables.

Research design

We test our hypothesis in three countries: the United States (Tea Party), the Netherlands (PVV) and Germany (*Die Linke*). These three parties have different host-ideologies. The Tea Party is a populist faction (Skocpol & Williamson 2013) in the Republican Party that is seen as conservative (Williamson et al. 2011; Gervais & Morris 2012; Parker & Barreto 2013); *Die Linke* is perceived as socialist and the PVV as radical right (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser 2012). We selected ideologically heterogeneous populist parties to underline the fact that the anti-establishment message is the common denominator of populist parties – not their 'host' ideology.

We draw from datasets in the United States (the 2012 American National Election Studies [ANES]; and the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study [CCES]), the Netherlands (the 2010 Longitudinal Internet Studies for Social Science Research [LISS panel]) and Germany (the 2009 German Post Election Study). An obvious drawback of using different datasets is that theoretical concepts cannot always be measured by the same variables. However, we take care to achieve measurement equivalence across our dependent and independent variables (see Table 1 for an overview).[4]

Study 1: Agreeableness and populism in the US: Tea Party support

Materials and methods

We employ two American samples: the first is the pre-election survey of the ANES (2012); and the second is the second wave of a random sub-sample of the 2010 CCES (Ansolabehere, 2010). In the ANES 2012 we use an item measuring support for the Tea Party that ranges from 'strong support' (1) through 'strong opposition' (7). In the CCES 2010 we relied on the item which asks people to express 'their favorability of the Tea Party'. This item ranged from 'very positive' (1) through 'very negative' (5). We reversed both items to range from very negative attitudes towards the Tea Party (0) through very positive attitudes towards the Tea Party (1).

In both samples, personality traits were measured using the Ten Item Personality Inventory (TIPI), which measures each trait with two items (Gosling et al. 2003). We controlled for gender, age, age^2, race, education, authoritarianism, and social and economic attitudes. The item wording of the independent variables, the descriptive statistics and the

Table 1. Schematic overview of the studies

	Study 1: Tea Party		Study 2: PVV	Study 3: *Die Linke*
	ANES 2012	CCES 2010		
Dependent variable	Support for the Tea Party	Support for the Tea Party	Vote intention for the PVV	Vote for *Die Linke*
Personality	TIPI (#10)	TIPI (#10)	IPIP-FFM (#50)	Five-item personality inventory (#5)
Economic attitudes	Spending preferences (#1)	Spending preferences (#1)	Income redistribution (#1)	Spending preferences (#1)
Social attitudes	Moral-traditionalism (#4)	Abortion attitudes (#4)	Immigration attitudes (#1)	Immigration attitudes (#1)
Authoritarianism	Yes (#3)	Yes (#3)	No	No
N	5,016	1,060	4,849	1,497

Note: # indicates the number of items used to measure the construct.

correlations between the independent variables can be found in the Online Appendices A (ANES) and B (CCES).

Results

Due to the ordinal nature of this dependent variable we ran a series of ordered logistic regression models with clustered standard errors at the state level. In Table 2 (left-hand column) we present the model where we control for the other four personality traits, gender, age, education and race, and a second model where we also include authoritarianism and our ideological variables. Starting with the ANES 2012, we observe that Agreeableness is consistently associated with support for the Tea Party. Figure 1 (upper panel) presents the predicted support for the Tea Party while holding all other variables at their central tendencies. We observe that, in line with the expectations, low scorers on Agreeableness (5th percentile) are more likely to support the Tea Party (0.13 [95%CI = 0.11,0.15]) compared to high scorers (95th percentile) on Agreeableness (0.10 [95%CI = 0.09,0.11]). The effect of Agreeableness is on a par with the effect of Authoritarianism on support for the Tea Party as low scorers on Authoritarianism (5th percentile) are less likely to support the Tea Party (0.08 [95%CI = 0.07,0.10]) compared with high scorers (95th percentile) on Authoritarianism (0.13 [95%CI = 0.12,0.14]). The effects of Agreeableness are, however, modest compared to the effects of the attitudinal dimensions on the probability of voting for the Tea Party. Specifically, respondents with left-wing economic attitudes (5th percentile) are much less likely to have favourable attitudes towards the Tea Party (0.02 [95%CI = 0.02,0.03]) compared to respondents with right-wing (95th percentile) economic attitudes (0.23 [95%CI = 0.21,0.25]).

Turning to the CCES 2010, we analyse favourability to the Tea Party using two ordered logistic regression models (Table 2, right-hand column). The lower panel of Figure 1 projects

Table 2. Agreeableness and Tea Party favourability in 2012 (ANES) and 2010 (CCES)

	ANES 2012		CCES 2010	
	1	2	1	2
Agreeableness	0.73# (0.12)	0.59* (0.12)	0.43* (0.16)	0.46* (0.18)
Openness	0.31* (0.05)	0.78 (0.12)	0.18* (0.06)	0.73 (0.31)
Conscientiousness	2.25* (0.34)	1.00 (0.17)	5.64* (2.49)	1.33 (0.55)
Extroversion	1.35* (0.19)	1.15 (0.18)	1.42 (0.42)	1.42 (0.49)
Neuroticism	0.69* (0.09)	0.78 (0.12)	0.57# (0.18)	0.44* (0.18)
Age	0.92 (0.05)	0.67 (0.29)	1.78 (2.16)	0.20 (0.32)
Age^2	0.71 (0.25)	0.72 (0.29)	1.02 (1.24)	12.76 (21.97)
Female	1.06 (0.35)	1.07 (0.07)	0.64* (0.09)	0.92 (0.15)
Race				
Black	0.28* (0.03)	0.39* (0.06)	0.24* (0.04)	0.28* (0.08)
Hispanic	0.74* (0.06)	1.05 (0.09)	0.84 (0.14)	0.87 (0.23)
Other	0.96 (0.13)	1.17 (0.16)	2.12* (0.50)	1.26 (0.29)
Education	0.80* (0.02)	0.81* (0.02)	0.83* (0.04)	0.94 (0.05)
Authoritarianism	–	15.95* (2.21)	–	1.34 (0.27)
Economic attitudes	–	23.96* (3.28)	–	301.38* (102.32)
Social attitudes	–	1.71* (0.19)	–	8.69* (1.94)
N	5,016	4,210	1,060	987
Pseudo R^2	0.03	0.13	0.06	0.28
Wald Chi^2	441	1,810	194	1,385
Pseudo log likelihood	–7,993	–6,042	–1,448	–1,028

Notes: Ordered logistic regression models with standard errors clustered at the state level. Proportional odds ratios with standard errors in parentheses are reported. *$p < 0.05$; #$p < 0.1$.

the predicted sympathy for the Tea Party while keeping all other variables at their central tendency. Respondents with low levels of Agreeableness (5th percentile) are more likely to have very positive evaluations of the Tea Party (0.38 [95% CI = 0.35, 0.41]) compared with high scorers (95th percentile) on Agreeableness (0.32 [95% CI = 0.28, 0.32]). Again the effect of Agreeableness is grossly on a par with the effect of Authoritarianism but considerably smaller compared with the effects of the ideological variables.[5]

Moving to our additional explanations, we find in both samples that support for the Tea Party is, first, associated with low levels of Openness but high levels of Conscientiousness in the models without attitudinal covariates (i.e., model 1). However, the effects of these personality traits disappear when authoritarianism, as well as social and economic attitudes, are included. The effects of the other two traits are not consistent across the samples. In the ANES 2012, Extroversion is positively associated with support for the Tea Party, whereas Neuroticism is negatively associated with support for the Tea Party. These associations disappear when the attitudinal controls are included. Importantly, we do not replicate these findings in the CCES 2010, which questions the robustness of these associations. Our second finding is that conservative economic and social attitudes strongly predict support for the
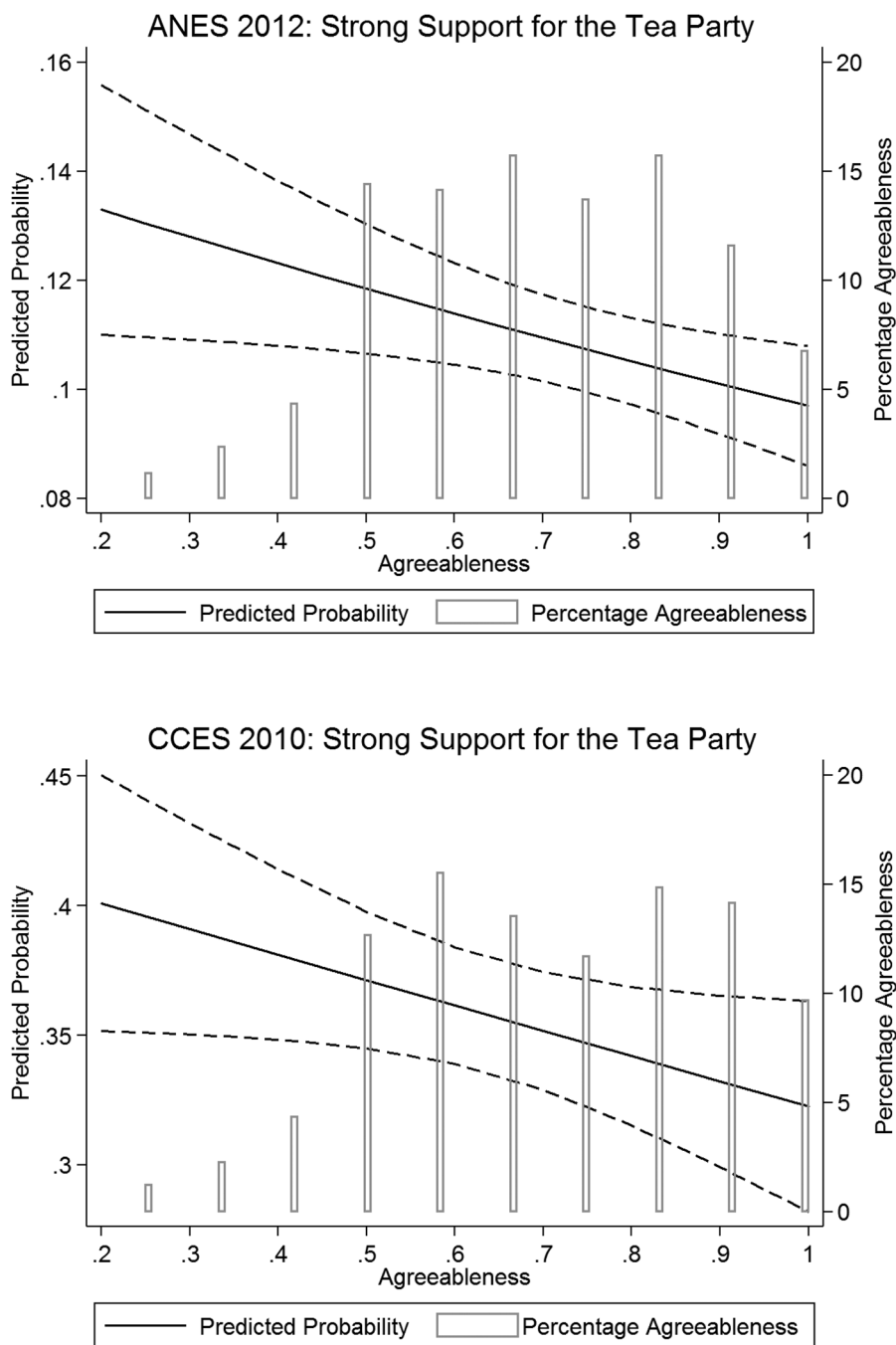
Figure 1. Predicted probability of supporting the Tea Party for different levels of Agreeableness.
Note: Predicted support for the Tea Party based upon an ordered logistic regression where we keep the covariates at their central tendencies.

Tea Party. Third, Authoritarianism is a strong predictor for Tea Party support in the ANES 2012 (Arceneaux & Nicholson 2012), yet this effect is not replicated in the CCES 2010. And fourth, in both samples, the socioeconomic background variables show a pattern with earlier research whereby African Americans and the higher educated are less likely to support the Tea Party (Arceneaux & Nicholson 2012).

Conclusion

To summarise, Agreeableness is a substantive predictor of support for the Tea Party even when controlling for a host of other predictors of support for the Tea Party. But is this finding unique to the Tea Party? To address that issue we turn to our two European polities.

Study 2: Agreeableness and populism in The Netherlands: Voting for the PVV

Materials and methods

The Dutch sample in study 2 is drawn from the longstanding Dutch LISS panel.[6] We rely upon the *politics and values wave* of this panel from the period 2009–2010. Respondents were asked '*Which party would you vote for if elections were held today?*'. We analysed the vote for the PVV and created a dummy variable with: vote for the PVV (1), and vote for all other parties (0).[7]

Personality traits were measured using the 50-item International Personality Item Pool – Five Factor Model (IPIP-FFM), which measures each trait using ten items (Ehrhart et al. 2008). We control for gender, age, age^2, education, and social and economic attitudes. The item wording of all independent variables, the descriptive statistics and the correlations between the independent variables are in Online Appendix D.

Results

First, we start with the comparisons of the mean levels of Agreeableness based upon the intention to support the PVV or not. As expected, the vote intention for the PVV is associated with a significant lower ($t(653) = -3.87$, $p < 0.001$) level of Agreeableness (M = 0.64, SD = 0.16) compared to the mean of the sample (M = 0.66). In Table 3, we observe that Agreeableness is a predictor of vote intention for the PVV (see also Figure 2). Respondents low on Agreeableness (5th percentile) were more likely to vote for the Freedom Party (0.16 [95%CI = 0.14,0.18]) compared to respondents high (95th percentile) on Agreeableness (0.11 [95%CI = 0.09,0.13]). This effect is substantive, yet not on a par with the effect of social attitudes on vote intention for the PVV. Respondents with left-wing social attitudes (5th percentile) are much less likely to vote for the PVV (0.01 [95%CI = 0.01,0.01]) compared with respondents with right-wing (95th percentile) social attitudes (0.29 [95%CI = 0.26,0.31]).

Now we look at the additional explanations. First, high levels of Conscientiousness predict voting for the PVV in our model without the two ideological variables (model 1, Table 3). Conscientiousness is also correlated with social and economic attitudes (Gerber et al. 2010). Hence, and second, this explains why we do not find statistically significant

Table 3. Agreeableness and vote for the PVV

	1	2
Agreeableness	0.29* (0.11)	0.39* (0.15)
Openness	0.56 (0.18)	0.75 (0.25)
Conscientiousness	3.08* (1.02)	1.43 (0.50)
Extroversion	3.94* (1.29)	2.63* (0.87)
Neuroticism	1.55 (0.46)	1.34 (0.40)
Female	0.55* (0.05)	0.63* (0.06)
Age	1.61 (1.25)	1.52 (1.27)
Age^2	0.23 (0.22)	0.27 (0.27)
Education	0.73* (0.02)	0.74* (0.03)
Economic attitudes	–	1.08 (0.22)
Social attitudes	–	136.43* (45.58)
Constant	0.66 (0.24)	0.02* (0.01)
N	4,849	4,655
Pseudo R^2	0.05	0.15
Wald Chi^2	215	389
Log likelihood	–1,819	–1,565

Notes: Logistic regression models, odds ratios reported with standard errors in the parentheses. Observations are clustered at the household level. *$p < 0.05$.
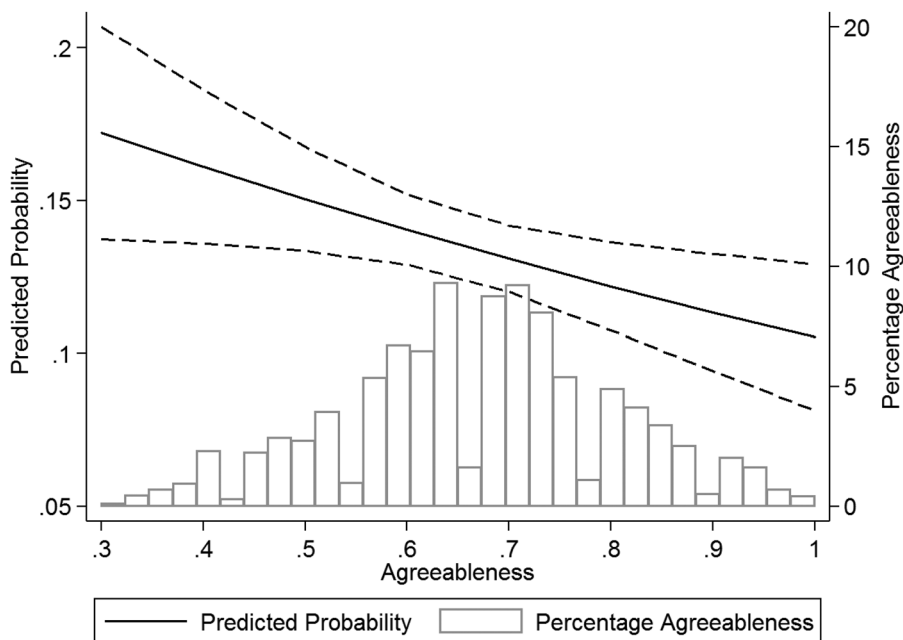

Figure 2. Predicted probability of supporting the PVV for different levels of Agreeableness.
Note: Predicted probabilities based upon a logistic regression where we keep the covariates at their central tendencies.

effects for Conscientiousness when we control for our two ideological variables in model 2 (Table 3). Second, Extroversion is associated with vote intention for the PVV. Specifically, extroverts (95th percentile) are more likely to vote for the PVV (0.16 [95%CI = 0.14,0.19]) compared with introverted (5th percentile) respondents (0.11 [95%CI = 0.09,0.13]). The PVV is a new party and this could explain why extroverts are more likely to be drawn to it. Third, Openness and Neuroticism are unrelated to vote intention for the PVV. Fourth, we find that the lower educated, men and the young are more likely to vote for the PVV.

Conclusion

In our Dutch sample, we find robust evidence for the relationship between Agreeableness and voting for a populist party. Yet, like the Tea Party, the PVV is a right-wing party. We turn to a populist party with a left-wing 'host' ideology in order to see if Agreeableness is associated with support for populist parties irrespective of the 'host' ideology.

Study 3: Agreeableness and populism in Germany: Voting for *Die Linke*

Materials and methods

The German sample is based on the German Post Election Study of the year 2009 (Rattinger et al. 2011). Participants were asked which party they voted for in their local constituency during the national elections. We analyse voting for *Die Linke*. We created a dummy variable with: vote for *Die Linke* (1), and vote for all other parties (0).

Personality was measured with a five-item personality inventory. The item wording of all independent variables, the descriptive statistics and the correlations between the independent variables are in the Online Appendix E. We controlled for gender, age, age^2, education (model 1), and the social and economic attitude dimensions (model 2).

Results

First, we compare means of Agreeableness of *Die Linke* voters and other voters. We observe that voters for *Die Linke* score lower (t(213) = –1.63, p = 0.05) on Agreeableness (M = 0.54, SD = 0.26) compared to the mean of the sample (M = 0.57). Turning to the regression analyses, we confirm that lower levels of Agreeableness are related to a higher probability of voting for *Die Linke* and these results are robust across model specifications (Table 4). We calculated the predicted probabilities of voting for the populist party among voters low (5th percentile) and high (95th percentile) on Agreeableness (see also Figure 3). Here, low scorers on Agreeableness are more likely to vote for populist parties (0.15[95%CI = 0.12,0.19]) compared to the high scorers on Agreeableness (0.10 [95%CI = 0.07,0.13]).[8] This effect is substantive, but not as large as the effect of economic attitudes on voting for the populist party. Specifically, respondents with left-wing economic attitudes (5th percentile) are more likely to vote for *Die Linke* (0.28 [95%CI = 0.21,0.34]) compared with respondents with right-wing economic attitudes (95th percentile) who are not very likely to vote for *Die Linke* (0.05 [95%CI = 0.03,0.07]).

Table 4. Agreeableness and vote for *Die Linke*

	1	2
Agreeableness	0.53* (0.17)	0.49* (0.17)
Openness	1.76 (0.60)	2.69* (1.11)
Conscientiousness	0.47 (0.20)	0.57 (0.28)
Extroversion	2.14* (0.65)	2.09* (0.70)
Neuroticism	1.21 (0.42)	1.38 (0.53)
Female	0.82 (0.13)	0.80 (0.14)
Age	4.34 (5.93)	6.76 (10.39)
Age^2	0.24 (0.35)	0.14 (0.23)
Education	0.86 (0.07)	0.87 (0.08)
Economic attitudes	–	0.14* (0.05)
Social attitudes	–	1.16 (0.39)
Constant	0.29* (0.18)	0.38 (0.29)
N	1,495	1,348
Pseudo R^2	0.02	0.05
LR Chi^2	22	53
Log likelihood	596	488

Notes: Logistic regression models, odds ratios reported with standard errors in the parentheses. *$p < 0.05$.
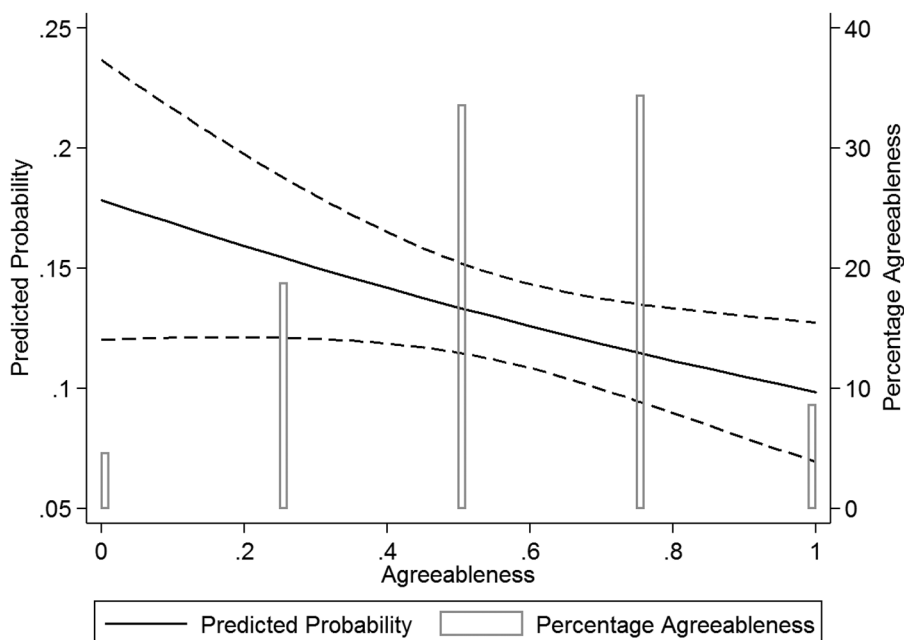

Figure 3. Predicted probability of supporting *Die Linke* for different levels of Agreeableness.
Note: Predicted probabilities are based upon a logistic regression where we keep the covariates at their central tendencies.

Moving to our additional explanations, we find, first, that high Openness and high Extroversion relates to voting for *Die Linke*. Openness is often associated with left-wing ideology (Jost et al. 2003; Gerber et al. 2010) and extroverts might find it exciting to vote for a new party (Kam & Simas 2012). *Die Linke* was new in the 2009 elections, although the party is a merger of two parties that previously participated in elections. Note that the effects for Extroversion and Openness are grossly on a par with the effects of Agreeableness. Furthermore we find that Conscientiousness and Neuroticism do not relate to voting for *Die Linke*. Our second finding is that left-wing economic attitudes are strongly associated with the vote for *Die Linke*, but social attitudes are not. And third, we find no relationship between gender, age, age^2 and education and voting for *Die Linke*.

Conclusion

In sum, we find a negative relationship between Agreeableness and voting for *Die Linke*. This confirms that Agreeableness is associated with support for populist parties irrespective of the 'host' ideology.

Discussion

There is a long tradition in the political psychology literature that analyses the psychological roots of political radicalism or extremism (Adorno et al. 1950; Feldman 2003; Duckitt & Sibley 2010). This article fits into this tradition but turns to the more contemporary phenomenon of populist parties such as the American Tea Party, the Dutch Party for Freedom, the Danish People's Party, the French *Front National* and *Die Linke* in Germany. Populist parties combine an anti-establishment message with some 'host' ideology of which the content depends on the specific political context. Building on the state-of-the-art in political psychology (Caprara & Zimbardo 2004; Jost et al. 2009) we expect individuals to support a party if there is congruency between their personality and the party's message. Arguing that Agreeableness is the best candidate for this 'congruency model', we hypothesised that individuals low on Agreeableness are more likely to support populist parties.

We find evidence for our hypothesis across two continents, three countries (the United States, the Netherlands and Germany), four independent samples (in total, 12,422 respondents) and three ideologically heterogeneous populist parties (see Table 5). Also, our findings are robust against a number of other plausible explanations.[9] The effect of Agreeableness is substantive across samples, but smaller than the effects of ideology on support for populist parties. This is not surprising as personality arguably is a more distant antecedent of support for political parties compared to ideology.

By demonstrating the psychological antecedents of populist voting, our article also provides a richer, psychological micro-foundation for the support of populist parties. Oftentimes voting for populist parties is seen as irrational (Billiet & Witte 1995): a blunt vote against the political establishment (Bergh 2004) with no real purpose. But it is not irrational to express discontent if that is one's purpose (Van der Eijk et al. 1996). Individuals low on Agreeableness perceive others as not being trustworthy and reliable (Costa et al. 1991). A

Table 5. Overview of the association between personality and voting for populist parties

	Study 1: Tea Party		Study 2: PVV	Study 3: *Die Linke*
	ANES	CCES		
Agreeableness	–	–	–	–
Openness				+
Conscientiousness				
Extroversion			+	+
Neuroticism		–		

Note: The association between the Big Five traits and voting for the populist party in the full model is positive (+), negative (–) or absent (blank space).

party that claims that the political establishment cannot be trusted and is dishonest speaks the language of these low agreeable voters.

New findings always beg new questions. First, *which psychological needs and motivations link Agreeableness to populist voting?* Jost et al. (2009) identify epistemic, existential and relational motives – which satisfy specific needs – that explain the link between the Big Five and general left-right ideology. Future research should identify the exact nature of the causal relations between personality traits, individual needs, motivations and support for populist parties, and remain open to theories that differ in conceptualisation and causal order (Denissen & Penke 2008; Fleeson & Jayawickreme 2015).

Second, *in which political and economic context is populism likely to flourish?* Our study cannot predict the ebb and flow in support for populist parties over time. In order for low agreeable individuals to be exposed to anti-establishment messages (1) there has to be a populist party in the first place; (2) the media should pay (much) attention to the messages of these parties (Vliegenthart et al. 2012); (3) mainstream parties should engage in debate with these parties (Meguid 2005); and (4) political and socioeconomic conditions should make the issues of the populist party salient (Arzheimer 2009; Arzheimer & Carter 2006). By designing experiments in which the political or economic context is manipulated, we could identify what exactly activates low agreeable individuals and the separate contextual factors that increase support for the populist 'host' ideology, as well as contextual factors that increase anti-establishment support. Duckitt and Sibley's (2010) dual process model can be an important guide here, as it claims that support for related ideological constructs (social dominance orientation and right-wing authoritarianism) is a function of the combination of a specific context and personality.

Third, *how solid is the link between Agreeableness and populist voting over time?* Do populist voters become less agreeable? And do they continue supporting the party if it becomes integrated into the political establishment? Voters adjust their attitudes in line with their vote choice (Beasley & Joslyn 2001) and voting for populist parties fuels political dissatisfaction (Van der Brug 2003; Rooduijn 2013) and a closer identification with the party's operational 'host' ideology (Bakker et al. 2015b). Following this last finding, populist voters may over time become policy voters instead, and remain party supporters even when the establishment absorbs the populist party. It is, however, unlikely that populist voters

become less agreeable because personality traits are relative stable over the long run and unaffected by election outcomes (Gerber et al. 2013).

According to Caprara and Zimbardo (2004: 584), 'a crucial skill for politicians is learning to speak the language of personality, namely, to navigate properly in the domain of personality attributes by identifying and conveying those individual characteristics that are most appealing at a certain time to a particular constituency'. Populists like Marine Le Pen, Geert Wilders, Sarah Palin and Nigel Farage have mastered the skill of activating voters with low agreeable personalities. That is what unites them *across* political contexts, what separates them from existing parties *within* political contexts, and what underlies their perhaps unexpected success.

Acknowledgements

Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's web-site:

A – Study 1: ANES 2012
B – Study 1: CCES 2010
C – Study 1: Discriminant Validity US
D – Study 2: Dutch Sample (LISS)
E – Study 3: German Post Election Study 2009
F – Discriminant validity in the Dutch and German samples.
G – Interaction between personality traits
H – Interactions: Agreeableness X Social and Economic Ideology
I – Government vs. opposition dynamics in the Netherlands

Notes

1. 'Europe's Tea Party: Insurgents parties are likely to do better in 2014 than any time since the second world war', *The Economist*, 4 January 2014. Replication materials are stored online at: www.bertbakker.com
2. The Tea Party is a faction within a political party.
3. This congruency should also express itself in individuals seeing the party's *leader* as similar in terms of personality traits. This could be the case for populist parties too, but we do not have the information to test this.

4. The correlations between the independent variables in our analyses are in the same directions and, most often, of the same magnitude across the samples (see Online Appendix Table A.3 [ANES], Table B.3 [CCES], Table D.3 [Netherlands] and Table E.3 [Germany]).

5. Online Appendix C shows the discriminant validity of our findings in the United States.

6. More information about the LISS panel can be found online at: www.lissdata.nl

7. We do not include the Socialist Party (NL) in our analysis as no consensus exists as to whether this party should be classified as populist (Rooduijn et al. 2014).

8. Bakker et al. (2015a) reported no association between Agreeableness and identification with *Die Linke*. The nature of these different findings is hard to explain. Yet because of conceptual and operational differences between party identification and vote intention (Thomassen & Rosema 2009), we should not expect that they have necessarily the same psychological antecedents. Future research should address this issue.

9. First, we find no evidence that support for the PVV or *Die Linke* is equivalent to supporting conservative parties (Online Appendix F) or opposition parties (Online Appendix I). Second, we find no evidence that Agreeableness might interact with Openness and Conscientiousness in predicting support for populist parties (Online Appendix G). Third, we find inconsistent evidence across our samples for the idea that the effects of Agreeableness on support for populist parties could be conditional on ideology (Online Appendix H).

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Address for correspondence: Bert N. Bakker, Amsterdam School of Communication Research, University of Amsterdam, Nieuwe Achtergracht 166, 1001 NG Amsterdam, The Netherlands. E-mail: b.n.bakker@uva.nl