

Personality and the Ideological  
Left-Right Dimension

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## Personality and the Ideological Left-Right Dimension<sup>i</sup>

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Personality can be measured. Psychology assumes that there are a limited number of basic human personality traits. These are attributes that are considered to be permanent, and which consist of both thoughts (cognitions) and feelings (emotions), but also of recognizable behaviors. There is a high degree of consensus that our personality can be best described and summarized using five overarching characteristics. These five general personality traits are usually referred to as the degree of openness, the degree of conscientiousness, the degree of extraversion, the degree of agreeableness and the degree of neuroticism. This is also known as the five-factor model or in English, as The Big Five Model (Fahlke and Johansson 2008).

The five different personality traits have been determined by looking at the complex interactions between inherited and environmental factors. The traits are of some considered to be stable once a person reaches the age of 25 (Terracciano, T. et al 2010). Studies have shown that some of the personality traits can already be observed and measured empirically in small children, and that these behaviors then persist for the rest of their lives. Research shows that some personality traits probably have a clear genetic connection (Caspi et al 2005).

Because the different personality traits are relatively constant over time, knowledge of them can be used to "predict" different behaviors. Psychological studies have shown a clear link between the five personality traits and smoking, alcohol consumption, mental health and cardiovascular disease (Ozer et al 2006, Roberts et al. 2007).

But research has also been done on the connection between different personality traits and different societal phenomena such as political participation, political views, and party choice. However, studies which focus on the connection between personality and politics are relatively new, and have thus far been mostly based on American datasets (Hatemi et al. 2011, Mondak et al. 2010, Gerber et al. 2010). We intend to carry out the first study based on Swedish data.

Our particular focus is on the connection between personality and positioning on the ideological left-right scale. American research has shown that a high degree of openness can be associated with left-leaning views, while a high degree of emotional stability and conscientiousness, but also a degree of extraversion, can be linked to ideological positions on the right (Gerber et al 2010). The question is whether a similar pattern exists in Sweden.

We are able to conduct an analysis of this kind using Swedish data thanks to the fact that SOM surveys have included a subjective measure asking participants to position themselves on a five-degree left-right scale. But also because the SOM Institute has run a research project since 2009 called *Culture, Health and Personality*, which systematically measures the different personality characteristics of the five-factor model.<sup>ii</sup> The operational measurements used at SOM are based on a battery of questions developed by Petter Gustavsson at Karolinska Institutet (Gustavsson 2003, 2010). The construction of the measurements and their accuracy are analyzed more closely in Holmberg and Weibull (2010), based on the 2009 SOM study. The measurements in 2010 gave the same results as those from 2009, further demonstrating a high level of consistency between SOM's personality measurements and the results from other similar personality tests (Gunnarsson 2011).

We identify the five personality traits as *extraversion* with hedonistic/outgoing at one end of the spectrum and *anhedonic/introverted* at the other, *neuroticism* between the qualities of calm/stable and



anxious/worried, *agreeableness* with antagonism/suspiciousness and goodwill/helpfulness as the extremes, *conscientiousness* with disciplined/trustworthy on one side and spontaneous/impulsive on the other, and *openness* with the contrasting characteristics of curious/observant and practical/crude.

### Connection to Left-Right Views

It would be rather sensational if the five different personality traits were to show very strong connections with Swedish citizens' ideological positions. However, since subjective left-right placement is the strongest factor we have when it comes to explaining how Swedes vote, this would imply that inherited personality traits could be one of the most important factors influencing Swedish elections (Oscarsson and Holmberg 2008). But it is not. It is true that the five personality traits have some connection with people's left-right views, but the correlation can hardly be characterized as strong. The most evident connection shows the degree of neuroticism with a correlation of -14 (r). The weakest connection is with the degree of agreeableness (-.02). The other personality traits have correlations that range between these two.<sup>iii</sup>

The relationships are represented in more detail in Table 1. There we show where people with different degrees of the five personality traits place themselves on the left-right scale. The characteristics are ranked according to how strong the connections are to the respondents' ideological positioning. The degree of neuroticism is located at the top, and the degree of agreeableness is located at the bottom.

**Table 1 The Relationship Between Different Personality Traits and Ideological Position on a Left-Right Scale (percentages)**

	Ideological Opinion			Total Percentage
	Left	Neither/Nor	Right	
Neuroticism				
Low degree	24	21	55	100
Medium	32	26	42	100
High degree	36	27	37	100
Extraversion				
Low degree	35	27	38	100
Medium	31	24	45	100
High degree	27	26	47	100
Openness				
Low degree	25	29	46	100
Medium	32	25	43	100
High degree	34	23	43	100
Conscientiousness				
Low degree	31	26	43	100
Medium	33	24	43	100
High degree	27	29	44	100
Agreeableness				
Low degree	31	25	44	100
Medium	34	23	43	100
High degree	29	28	43	100

**Comments:** The results are based on the national SOM-study from 2010. The five personality traits have been measured using a questionnaire with fifteen questions designed by Petter Gustavsson from Karolinska Institutet. The left-right positions of the respondents have been determined using a self-assessment question.

People with a high degree of neuroticism (anxiety) tend to be relatively more left-leaning (36 percent) than people with a low degree of neuroticism (24 percent). Conversely, people with a low degree of

neuroticism (calm) are often ideologically right-leaning (55 percent), more so than people with a high degree of neuroticism (37 percent). The other personality traits do not have such clear links to left-right positions, but some weaker patterns can be observed. People with a high degree of outgoingness (extraversion) have a certain tendency to be ideologically right-leaning, while people who are introverted tend to be left-leaning. In terms of the personality trait openness, we can see that people with a high degree of openness (curiosity) tend to lean to the left while people with a low degree of openness (conventionality) tend to weakly lean to the right. The personality traits agreeableness and conscientiousness have such weak links with left-right positioning that they are not considered to be statistically significant, even at simple bivariate levels.

**Table 2 Regression Analyses Using Five Personality Traits as Independent Variables and Subjective Left-Right Position as the Dependent Variable (b-values)**

	Bivariate Regression			Multivariate Regression	
	b-value	Standard Error	R <sup>2</sup>	b-value	Standard Error
Neuroticism	-.25***	.05	.02	-.23***	.05
Extraversion	+.19*	.06	.01	+.13	.07
Openness	-.11*	.05	.00	-.16*	.06
Conscientiousness	+.04	.05	.00	-.02	.05
Agreeableness	-.03	.05	.00	-.02	.05

**Comments:** Significance Levels = \* < .05, \*\* < .01, \*\*\* < .001. R<sup>2</sup> value for the multivariate OLS regression is .03. The personality variables can vary from 1 to 4. The dependent variable is subjective left-right position with five values between 1 (left) and 5 (right).

**Table 3 Multivariate Regression Analysis Using the Five Personality Traits as Independent Variables and Subjective Left-Right Position as the Dependent Variable, Controlling for Four Different Social Group Affiliations (b-values)**

	b-value	Standard Error
<b>Personality Traits</b>		
Neuroticism	-.24***	.05
Extraversion	+.05	.07
Openness	-.28***	.06
Conscientiousness	-.01	.06
Agreeableness	-.01	.06
<b>Social Affiliation</b>		
Occupational Group	+.37***	.03
Level of Education	+.06*	.03
Age	-.05*	.03
Gender	-.13	.07

**Comments:** Significance Levels = \* < .05, \*\* < .01, \*\*\* < .001. The R<sup>2</sup> value of the multivariate OLS-regression is .13. The personality variables can range from 1 to 4. Occupational groups have values 1 for working class, 2 for white-collar, 3 for self-employed/agriculture and 4 for higher-professionals. The level of education is coded between 1 (= low level of education) and 4 (= highly educated). The age variable comprises four groups from 1 (young) to 4 (old). The gender variable is women classified as 1 and men as 2. The left-right variable can vary between 1 (= left) and 5 (= right).

When we examine whether the different personality traits have independent effects associated with people's left-right placements, while controlling for other personality differences, the results show that two of the personality traits, have such effects. It is most clearly shown for neuroticism, but also for openness (see Table 2). The other three personality traits, including conscientiousness which has a

significant effect at the bivariate level, show no significant effects with where the respondents place themselves on the ideological left-right scale.

So far, our main finding is that people who are more neurotic tend to be more ideologically left-leaning, while people who are calmer tend to be more right-leaning. In line with this, people who are more curious tend to lean to the left, while people who are more conventional tend to be ideologically on the right. However, these are not strong connections. The total variation when we look at all five personality traits together, as factors explaining left-right views, is only three percent ( $R^2 = .026$ ). However, both of these effects remain, even after we have controlled for the impact of a number of socioeconomic factors that we know usually affect where people place themselves on a left-right scale (Oscarsson and Holmberg 2008). The social variables we included in our control were gender, age, level of education, and occupation. The regression results in Table 3 show that the effect coefficients for neuroticism and openness continue to be significant when the various social variables are included in the test model.

Among the social variables, age, level of education and occupation show significant effects after controlling for other variables, including the personality traits. Younger people and those working in blue-collar jobs tend to lean somewhat to the left, irrespective of personality traits. Similarly, older folks and people belonging to the upper middle-class or who are entrepreneurs, tend to lean somewhat to the right ideologically, regardless of their personality traits.

### **Personality Plays a Role**

The most comprehensive American study which examines the link between personality traits and ideological left-right attitudes has produced results that are very similar to ours (Gerber et al 2010). In the US, just as in Sweden, openness and neuroticism have an effect on where people tend to place themselves on the left-right scale – even after controlling for social variables. And the relationships look the same - the more open a person is, the further to the left they lean, and the more neurotic, the more to the left. In addition to this, the American study shows the effects of two more personality traits which also have significance, which the Swedish study does not, even though the pattern of the relationships is the same. The traits are the degree of conscientiousness (the more conscientious, the more to the right) and the degree of extraversion (the more extroverted, the more to the right). One reason that both of these traits reach high levels of significance in the American study, is possibly due to the fact that the American study includes a total of 12 400 participants. The Swedish SOM study includes only about 1 500 people. Weak connections become more easily statistically significant in larger studies. Another possible explanation is that the American studies use a slightly different instrument to measure personality, and therefore we do not get complete agreement in our results.

In both the United States and Sweden, one personality trait showed no significant effect on left-right placement. That characteristic is the level of agreeableness. However, the similarity of the results in the United States as well as in Sweden suggests that we are onto something. Personality seems to play a role when it comes to ideological positions. But the relationship is not dramatic in any way. The effects are weak. But the interesting thing is that these effects exist at all, and that they persist even when controlling for other relevant factors. People's left-right attitudes are not only determined by sociological and political factors. Inherited psychological traits also play a role. A small role, but a role, nonetheless.



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<sup>iii</sup> The correlations are +.08 for the degree of extraversion (significant at .01), +.05 for the degree of openness (significant at .05), +.02 for the level of conscientiousness (not significant). The correlation for the degree of neuroticism (-.14) is significant at the .01 level. The correlation for the degree of agreeableness (-.02) is not significant.

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