The impact of dark tetrad traits on political orientation and extremism: an analysis in the course of a presidential election

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Abstract

Previous research on personality and political attitudes has been conducted in countries where political parties from the center dominate the political system. In the present research \((N = 675)\), we focus on the relationship between the dark side of human personality and political orientation and extremism, respectively, in the course of a presidential election where the two candidates represent either left-wing or right-wing political policies. Narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and everyday sadism were associated with right-wing political orientation, whereas narcissism and psychopathy were associated with political extremism. Moreover, the relationships between personality and right-wing political orientation and extremism, respectively, were relatively independent from each other.

Keywords: Political science, Sociology, Psychology

1. Introduction

The Austrian presidential election in 2016 was a historic one, because this was the first time since the Second World War that an Austrian president had not been backed by either of the two governing center-left Social Democratic and center-right Austrian People's parties. The two candidates who made it to the second
round (after none of the candidates received a majority of votes cast in the first round) were Alexander Van der Bellen, former head of the Austrian Green party, representing a left-wing political attitude, and Norbert Hofer, candidate for the Freedom Party of Austria, representing right-wing policies. Van der Bellen then became the first European head of state with a green background. In the present research, we were interested in how the personalities of those voting for the left-wing and the right-wing candidate, respectively, would differ. Concretely, we examined to which extent the Dark Tetrad (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and everyday sadism) would predict political orientation as well as political extremism.

1.1. Political attitudes and the dark side of human personality

Political attitudes and electoral behavior can be explained by different personality variables, but those representing dark personalities seem to have a particularly important impact on political extremism and election of politicians and political parties who are considered right- or left-wing. According to Paulhus and Williams (2002), there are three distinct dimensions that represent the dark side of human personality (labelled the Dark Triad): narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. Narcissism is associated with self-idealization, pretension, and the need for admiration (Raskin and Hall, 1979). Machiavellianism is associated with misanthropy, cynicism, pragmatism, lack of empathy, manipulation, immoral beliefs, and self-interest (for a review, Jones and Paulus, 2011). Psychopathy as a personality trait involves lack of empathy, fearlessness, hubris, and social misbehavior (Board and Fritzon, 2005). The factor that was added last to the dark personality model and turned the Dark Triad into the Dark Tetrad was everyday sadism (Buckels et al., 2013; Chabrol et al., 2009). Everyday sadism is conceptually distinct in that this trait in particular is associated with the need to harm others physically or emotionally and feeling joy while doing it (Greitemeyer, 2015; Greitemeyer and Sagioglou, 2017; Pfattheicher and Schindler, 2015; Reidy et al., 2011). However, it should be noted that everyday sadism is positively related to the other dark personalities, in particular with psychopathy and Machiavellianism (e.g., Book et al., 2016; Mededović and Petrović, 2015). Overall, although everyday sadism can be considered a unique construct, it is associated with psychopathy, narcissism, and Machiavellianism and, hence, a similar pattern of associations between everyday sadism and political orientation and political extremism, respectively, as for the other Dark Tetrad traits can be expected.

Previous research on the relationship between the dark side of human personality and political orientation has been conducted in countries where political parties from the center dominate the political system. For example, one study—employing U.S. American samples—has shown that narcissism and psychopathy were associated with political conservatism, whereas Machiavellianism was associated
with low rates of liberalism (Jonason, 2014). The Dark Triad traits also correlate with conservative judgments such as capital punishment, gay marriage, and gun control (Arvan, 2013). Dark personalities appear to be related to outgroup threat perceptions and a negative attitude towards immigrants (Hodson et al., 2009). Likewise, narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy have been all shown to be associated with social dominance orientation (Jones and Figueredo, 2013), which in turn has been linked to prejudice and discrimination (e.g., Sidanius and Pratto, 1999). Another study (Jonason, 2015) focused on the influence of the Dark Triad on racism in Australia. Most important was that Machiavellianism significantly correlated with right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation. Furthermore, narcissism was associated with right-wing authoritarianism, and both narcissism and psychopathy were associated with social dominance orientation. Finally, dark personality traits have been shown to be associated with moral foundations that in turn are linked to conservatism. For example, Mededović and Petrović (2016) showed that Machiavellianism predicted both ingroup/loyalty and authority/respect, whereas psychopathy was positively associated with ingroup/loyalty.

1.2. The present research

We examined the effects of Dark Tetrad traits on political attitudes and electoral behavior in course of the presidential election in Austria in 2016. Because voters in this election had the choice between candidates from the far-left and far-right, we could test how the dark side of human personality is linked to extreme political attitudes. We predicted that the Dark Tetrad would be positively associated with right-wing political orientation and political extremism. We also controlled for a host of other variables that might be associated with political orientation and/or the Dark Tetrad.

In Austria, no explicit ethical approval is needed if the study conforms to the guidelines of the German Psychological Society. Because this is the case for the current study, approval was waived from the review board psychology of the University of Innsbruck. At the beginning of the study, participants read detailed instructions regarding ethical guidelines (e.g., the data are analyzed anonymously).

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants were 675 Austrian citizens from all over the country (264 females, 411 males, mean age = 35.9, SD = 14.7). Participants were invited via social media (e.g., Facebook) and mailing lists. Participants learned that the submission of responses will be taken as permission to use these in research analysis and in resulting publications. Data collection was carried out during about one month.
after the election has taken place, with the aim of running as many participants as possible.

2.2. Measures

As possible covariates, participant sex, age, highest educational achievement (7.7% high school, 16% completed high school followed by an apprenticeship, 8.1% technical college, 29.3% Austrian school-leaving examination, 38.8% university degree), religion (85.6% religious, 14.4% not religious), monthly income (27.9% less than 1000€, 18.8% 1000-2000€, 21.3% 2000-3000€, 10.5% 3000-4000€, 7.4% 4000-5000€, 4.6% 5000-6000€, 2.7% 6000-7000€, 1.3% 7000-8000€, 5.5% more than 8000€), living in city (55.3%) or countryside (44.7%) were assessed. We assessed political orientation on a scale from 1 to 11 (1 representing left-wing orientation, 6 representing moderate political attitude and 11 representing right-wing orientation). A political extremity score was calculated by computing the absolute difference of participants’ scores from the political orientation scale midpoint (6). Participants were then asked to name the candidate they voted for (Alexander Van der Bellen, Norbert Hofer, or none of the given choices). Three-hundred and fifty-eight participants (53.0%) voted for Van der Bellen, 275 participants (40.7%) voted for Hofer, and 42 participants (6.2%) did not vote for either candidate. Van der Bellen defeated Hofer in the election with 53.8% of the votes, so these numbers can be seen as relatively representative of the Austrian population.

The Short Dark Triad (SD3) by Jones and Paulhus (2014) was used to assess narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy. Each scale contains nine items. Sample items for the narcissism scale (α = .74) are: “People see me as a natural leader” and “I insist on getting the respect I deserve”. Sample items for the Machiavellianism scale (α = .71) are: “I like to use clever manipulation to get my way” and “Make sure your plans benefit yourself, not others”. Sample items for the psychopathy scale (α = .77) are: “I like to get revenge on authorities” and “People who mess with me always regret it”. Everyday sadism was assessed with the Revised Assessment of Sadistic Personality (α = .83) (Plouffe et al., 2017). The scale contains 9 items. Sample items are: “I never get tired of pushing people around” and “I would hurt somebody if it meant that I would be in control”.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations of all measures are shown in Table 1. As can be seen, narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and everyday sadism were positively associated with political orientation. Moreover, Hofer voters had higher scores in narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, everyday sadism, and political extremism than did Van der Bellen voters, indicating that right-leaning
individuals score higher on all aspects of the dark personality. Narcissism and psychopathy were also associated with political extremism.

With regard to the control variables, men had higher scores on right-wing political orientation, $t(673) = 6.31$, $p < .001$, and the Dark Tetrad traits: narcissism, $t(673) = 6.46$, $p < .001$, Machiavellianism, $t(673) = 3.24$, $p < .01$, psychopathy, $t(673) = 4.33$, $p < .001$, and everyday sadism, $t(673) = 6.93$, $p < .001$. Participant age was negatively associated with right-wing political orientation, $r(675) = -1.0$, $p = .010$, political extremism, $r(675) = -.08$, $p = .034$, Machiavellianism, $r(675) = -.14$, $p < .001$, psychopathy, $r(675) = -.11$, $p = .005$, and everyday sadism, $r(675) = -.09$, $p = .021$, and Hofer voters were younger than Van der Bellen voters, $t(631) = 2.81$, $p = .005$. Religious participants scored higher in right-wing political orientation, $t(673) = 5.45$, $p < .001$, and Machiavellianism, $t(673) = 3.70$, $p < .001$, whereas non-religious participants scored higher in political extremism, $t(673) = 3.68$, $p < .001$. Participants who live in a city had higher scores in narcissism, $t(673) = 2.97$, $p < .01$, and everyday sadism, $t(673) = 2.89$, $p < .01$, than did participants who live on the countryside. Hofer voters were more likely than Van der Bellen voters to live on the countryside, $\chi^2(1, N = 631) = 6.44$, $p = .011$. Education was negatively associated with Machiavellianism, $r(675) = -.14$, $p < .001$, and psychopathy, $r(675) = -.17$, $p < .001$. Hofer voters had a lower educational achievement than Van der Bellen voters, $t(631) = 5.36$, $p < .001$. Income was negatively associated with Machiavellianism, $r(675) = -.10$, $p = .008$, and psychopathy, $r(675) = -.09$, $p = .002$.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations between voting preference, political orientation, political extremism, narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and everyday sadism.

|                  | $M$  | $SD$ | 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 5   | 6   |
|------------------|------|------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1. Voting preference | –    | –    |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| 2. Political orientation | 6.48 | 2.26 | -.65*** |     |     |     |     |     |
| 3. Political extremism | 1.85 | 1.38 | -.23*** | .11** |     |     |     |     |
| 4. Narcissism | 3.03 | 0.54 | -.10* | .15*** | .15*** |     |     |     |
| 5. Machiavellianism | 3.17 | 0.61 | -.27*** | .36*** | .07 | .26*** |     |     |
| 6. Psychopathy | 2.11 | 0.57 | -.20*** | .17*** | .13** | .27*** | .44*** |     |
| 7. Everyday sadism | 1.65 | 0.62 | -.13** | .19*** | .05 | .20*** | .43*** | .63*** |

Voting preference was coded: 1 = Hofer, 2 = Van der Bellen.
Correlations for voting preference are Spearman’s rho coefficients, all other correlations are Pearson coefficients.

*p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.
To examine which of the Dark Tetrad dimensions are associated with voting preference, political orientation, and political extremism, respectively, when controlling for the impact of participant sex, age, religion, residency, education, and income, three multiple regressions were performed on the data. In the first regression (binary logistic), the Dark Tetrad dimensions, participant sex, age, religion, residency, education, and income were used as predictors for voting preference (coded 1 = Hofer, 2 = Van der Bellen). Machiavellianism was associated with voting preference, B(SE) = -0.83 (0.17), \( p < .001 \). Education also significantly predicted voting preference, B(SE) = 0.16 (0.04), \( p < .001 \).

In the second regression, the same variables were used to predict political orientation. The overall regression was significant, \( F(10, 664) = 16.43, R^2 = 0.20, p < .001 \). Machiavellianism was associated with political orientation, \( \beta = .30, p < .001 \). Participant sex, \( \beta = .17, p < .001 \), age, \( \beta = -.10, p = .017 \), religion (coded: 1 = religious, 2 = non-religious), \( \beta = -.15, p < .001 \), and income, \( \beta = .11, p = .017 \), also significantly predicted political orientation. In the third regression, political extremism was regressed on the same predictor variables. The overall regression was significant, \( F(10, 664) = 4.64, R^2 = 0.07, p < .001 \). Narcissism, \( \beta = .11, p = .011 \), and psychopathy, \( \beta = .14, p = .008 \), were associated with political extremism. Participant age, \( \beta = -.11, p = .018 \), and religion, \( \beta = .15, p < .001 \), also received significant regression weights.

Please note that our measures of political orientation and political extremism were not independent from each other (see Table 1). However, controlling for political extremism did not change the pattern of findings when predicting political orientation (i.e., Machiavellianism received a significant regression weight). Similarly, controlling for political orientation did not change the pattern of findings when predicting political extremism (i.e., narcissism and psychopathy received significant regression weights).

4. Discussion

The present study showed that there is a positive association between all dimensions of the Dark Tetrad and a political right-wing attitude. Moreover, Machiavellianism turned out to be the most important predictor of the dark side of human personality for political orientation. Machiavellianism is associated with misanthropy, anti-social tendencies, cold-heartedness, and immoral beliefs (Jones and Paulhus, 2011). Perhaps because the Freedom Party of Austria strongly proposes anti-immigration and anti-Islam issues, voters scoring high on Machiavellianism are particularly inclined to vote for the party’s candidate.

In contrast, only narcissism and psychopathy were associated with political extremism. A possible explanation for the association between narcissism and political extremism is due to the narcissistic tendency of focusing on one’s own
interests whereas the needs of others are neglected (e.g., Campbell et al., 2002). The association between psychopathy and political extremism could be explained by psychopathic tendencies to have little empathy towards other people, being sociopathic, impulsive, and not being able to suppress behavioral tendencies that are not appreciated by society (e.g., Soderstrom, 2003).

Furthermore, Hofer voters had higher scores in narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and everyday sadism than did Van der Bellen voters. Although Van der Bellen was considered to be left-wing orientated, he was also considered to be far more politically moderate than Hofer. Thus, in comparison to each other, Norbert Hofer was considered to be the more “politically extreme” candidate. In fact, during the presidential election, Van der Bellen was not only endorsed by the Green party, but also by leaders of the center-left Social Democratic and center-right Austrian People’s parties.

Overall, we believe it is fair to say that there was a consistent relationship between the dark side of human personality and political orientation and extremism. Please keep in mind, however, that the correlation coefficients were either small or small to medium in its magnitude. Hence, the relationships between dark personality and political orientation and extremism appear to be relatively small in terms of their effect size.

Interestingly, education and income were negatively associated with Machiavellianism and psychopathy. Inasmuch as both are indicators of a person’s socioeconomic status, it appears that people with high socioeconomic status tend to be lower in dark personality. Note, however, that other research (Greitemeyer and Sagioglou, 2016) found an inconsistent pattern between measures of perceived socioeconomic status and Machiavellianism and psychopathy. Moreover, socioeconomic status has been shown to be positively associated with narcissism (Greitemeyer and Sagioglou, 2016; Piff, 2014). Further research is clearly needed to address the relationship between indicators of material status and dark personalities.

Some limitations of the study should be acknowledged. Most importantly, we relied on self-report measures to assess the Dark Tetrad. Self-report measures are quite transparent, so they raise concerns about demand characteristics and social desirability issues. Given the sensitive nature of the dark side of human personality, it is possible that participants deny these tendencies. However, this would only threaten the validity of our conclusions if either politically left- or right-leaning participants are more likely to misreport the Dark Tetrad.

We aimed for high statistical power to detect significant effects, so a relatively large number of individuals participated. Participants were chosen from an Austrian community sample, which should be more representative of the Austrian
population than university undergraduates. Nevertheless, our sample may also be prone to selection biases (e.g., only Internet users could participate), so future research may employ samples that are even more representative of the general population.

Despite these limitations, we are relatively confident that our main conclusions—that the dark side of human personality is associated with both right-wing political orientation and extremism—are warranted. Moreover, it appears that the relationships between the dark side of human personality and right-wing political orientation and extremism, respectively, are relatively independent from each other. That is, that the endorsement of extreme political orientations is associated with the dark side of human personality is not a consequence of voters scoring high in the Dark Tetrad being more politically right-leaning.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Tobias Greitemeyer, Boris Duspara: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

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