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Dispositioned to resist? The Big Five and resistance to dissonant political views

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates how dispositional traits influence the way individuals resist dissonant political information. More specifically, the relationship between the Big Five personality traits and four resistance strategies (avoidance, contesting, empowering, and negative affect) is explored. To do so, we present new evidence from an online survey where respondents from a Swiss sample ($N = 936$) were exposed to tailored counterarguments on a political initiative and asked to report their cognitive, behavioral, and affective responses to the dissonant messages. Against our expectations, openness is unrelated to any type of resistance. Conscientious individuals are hesitant to actively resist counter-attitudinal political information, while extraverts defend their attitude by bolstering their preexisting views. Similar tendencies are visible for agreeable respondents, although these individuals primarily rely on avoiding dissonant political content. Individuals high on neuroticism exhibit a strong emotional response by reacting with negative affect to oppositional political information.

1. Introduction

Research suggests that personality influences how people respond to conflict in social circumstances (Espinoza et al., 2023). This article builds on this idea and explores how personality informs the way individuals react to *political* disagreement – that is, to political opinions that challenge people's preexisting beliefs. Although exposure to opposing political views should foster tolerance (Matthes & Marquart, 2015), individuals often engage in biased information processes and tend to actively resist counter-attitudinal information (Kunda, 1990). This, in turn, might encourage the polarization of political attitudes and, for certain individuals, lead to a withdrawal from politics (Mutz, 2002; Testa et al., 2014). Literature further suggests that these processes are associated with individual-level factors, including the level of commitment (Ahluwalia, 2000), personal importance (Zuwerink Jacks & Cameron, 2003), or political sophistication (Taber & Lodge, 2006). In other terms, citizens' reaction to opposing political views is not uniform but varies with their predispositions. Yet, the extent to which personality influences how citizens resist opposing political views has not received the attention it deserves. To explore this question, we present evidence from an online survey conducted during the Swiss referendum campaign to ban face coverings in public spaces, which was specifically

targeted at Muslim women (so-called "burqa ban"). Respondents first answered a series of questions about their personality profile (i.e., Big Five personality traits) and attitudes towards the referendum. They were then exposed to a tailored counterargument on the initiative and asked to report their resistance to the information they received.

2. The Big Five and resistance to opposing political views

To explore the relationship between personality and resistance, we rely on one of the most systematic lists of defense mechanisms (Dillards, 2019) that encompass different cognitive, behavioral, and affective reactions to opposing views. In line with theories of reactance (e.g., Brehm, 1966), we focus, in other terms, on *active responses* to incongruent political messages, instead of investigating individual attitudes towards resistance (e.g., close-mindedness; van Prooijen & Krouwel, 2017).

The defense mechanisms can broadly be categorized into avoidance, contesting, empowering, and affective strategies (see Fransen et al., 2015; Table 1): as the name implies, *avoidance strategies* aim at bypassing alternative views through mechanisms such as selective avoidance (e.g., Knobloch-Westerwick & Meng, 2009). When individuals use *contesting strategies*, they actively engage with the incongruent message and refute

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Table 1
Resistance strategies.

Type	Strategy	Example
Avoidance	Selective avoidance	Ignoring information that is inconsistent with my opinion.
Contesting	Counterarguing	Arguing with the person who is challenging my opinion.
	Source derogation	Thinking negative things about the person who is challenging my opinion.
	Derogation of persuasive tactic	Being suspicious of the sponsor's manipulative intent.
Empowering	Attitude bolstering	Talking about the facts that support what I believe.
	Self-assertion	Thinking about how there is nothing the other person can say that will change my mind.
	Social validation	Thinking about the fact that lots of people share my convictions.
Affective	Negative affect	Respond by getting angry.

Note. See Valli & Nai (2022). Description of the strategies adapted from Zuwerink Jacks & Cameron (2003, p.151) For derogation of persuasive tactic, see Fransén et al. (2015).

the content, the source, or the tactic with which the opposing information is conveyed (e.g., Fransén et al., 2015). Individuals who use *empowering strategies*, on the other hand, bolster their preexisting political views by finding arguments that support their predispositions (i.e., attitude bolstering), validating their attitudes through significant others (i.e., social validation), or reminding themselves that nothing can change their opinion (i.e., self-assertion) (Zuwerink Jacks & Cameron, 2003). The last resistance strategy is *negative affect*, which describes when people reject a message by getting angry (Zuwerink Jacks & Devine, 2000).

To what extent is citizens' personality associated with how they resist counter-attitudinal political views? Open individuals seek intellectual stimulation (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Their strong need for challenging stimuli is reflected in their heterogeneous discussion network (Kim et al., 2013), the frequency with which they discuss politics (e.g., Boulianne & Koc-Michalska, 2022; but see Gerber et al., 2012) and approach controversial political conversations (Gronostay, 2019). Because open citizens are "receptive to ideas that might seem strange or radical" (Lee & Ashton, 2004, p.336), they are willing to engage in divergent thinking, which is mirrored in their collaborative and compromising conflict style (Tehrani & Yamini, 2020). In line with this, openness is positively related to political humility, which describes someone's "willingness to engage in thought, discuss, or consider opposing points of view" (Hodge et al., 2021, p.2). Following these findings, open individuals should be less likely to *avoid* opposing views (H1a) or experience *negative affect* when confronted with alternative political opinions (H1b). If they do challenge dissonant opinions, however, it is likely that they cognitively engage with the alternative information by using *contesting strategies* (H1c).

The predictions for conscientious individuals are less clear. Conscientious people "comply with conventional rules, norms, and standards" (Costa & McCrae, 1992, p.9). Because they tend to be self-controlled and rarely act on their impulses (Lee & Ashton, 2004), conscientious people should be less likely to experience *negative affect* when confronted with opposing views (H2a). Based on the lack of theoretical ground, we refrain from formulating directional hypotheses for the remaining resistance strategies.

Extraverted individuals are known for their sociability and assertiveness (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Because they experience less psychological discomfort when faced with disagreement (Matz et al., 2008), extraverts are open to political discussions (e.g., Gronostay, 2019), have

heterogeneous discussion networks (e.g., Kim et al., 2013; but see Song & Boomgaarden, 2019) and do not shy away from cross-cutting political discourse (Gerber et al., 2012). As extraverts have a domineering nature and are less concerned with social sanctions (Gerber et al., 2013), they voice their opinion, often try to convince others of their viewpoints, and primarily seek to fulfill their own needs in a conflict (Tehrani & Yamini, 2020). This is also reflected in their tendency to dominate political conversations (Grill, 2021). According to these findings, extraverts should be less likely to *avoid* confrontation with opposing views (H3a) but instead feel comfortable to actively *contest* incongruent positions (H3b).

Agreeable individuals have a strong need for "harmonious relations with others" (Costa & McCrae, 1992, p. 9). Because of their desire to maintain positive interpersonal relationships, they engage in constructive conflict resolutions, which often include shifting away from the conflict (Tehrani & Yamini, 2020). As such, we expect that they primarily resist through *avoidance strategies* (H4a). In the political realm, evidence supports this idea by showing that agreeable people avoid political discussions (e.g., Lindell & Strandberg, 2018) and struggle to speak up during political conversations (Grill, 2021). Because they are empathetic and reluctant to judge others (Gerber et al., 2012), they should also be less likely to directly attack opposing views with *contesting strategies* (H4b). Agreeable individuals also tend to regulate their behavior in a socially acceptable manner (Robinson, 2007) and only rarely lose their temper (Lee & Ashton, 2004). They should, thus, be less likely to report *negative affect* as a response to the counter-attitudinal positions (H4c).

Because individuals high in neuroticism are known to be anxious, nervous, and insecure (Gerber et al., 2012), they are generally more reactive to negative events (e.g., Robinson, 2007). As such, they are expected to experience *negative affect* when confronted with views that challenge their preexisting beliefs (H5a). Because they find contentious situations upsetting, they tend to avoid them and remain quiet in controversial political discussions (Grill, 2021). Evidence from conflict management backs these results by showing that neuroticism is positively related to the *avoidance* of conflictual situations (H5b) (Tehrani & Yamini, 2020). Our expectations are summarized in Table 2.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

An initial sample of $N = 3'069$ Swiss citizens was recruited between February and March 2021 via the ISO-certified German panel provider Gapfish and screened according to age, gender, and education. Only respondents who successfully passed an attention check ($N = 961$) are considered in our analyses (see Appendix A for a sample comparison). 10 straight liners were excluded from the sample, and 20 respondents did not finish the questionnaire. The final sample includes $N = 936$ respondents; 54 % female, average age 41.7 years ($SD = 14.1$). 37 % of respondents have a tertiary education, and the sample is ideologically moderate when looking at self-reported scores on the 0–10 left-right scale ($M = 4.8$, $SD = 2.4$). 47 % of participants initially favored the "burqa ban" initiative, 43 % opposed it, and 9 % were undecided.

After informed consent, participants were asked for their

Table 2
Hypotheses.

	Resistance strategies			
	Avoidance	Contesting	Empowering	Negative affect
Openness	–	+		–
Conscientiousness				–
Extraversion	–	+		
Agreeableness	+	–		–
Neuroticism	+			+

demographics and their personality profiles. Next, people reported their opinion on the veiling ban for Muslim women and were then exposed to a counterargument that challenged their initial position (see Appendix D for the stimuli material). Participants with a neutral opinion ($N = 43$) were randomly assigned to either the pro- or the contra-argument. After the exposure to the incongruent message, participants answered multiple questions that tapped into their cognitive, affective, and behavioral reactions to the stimuli.

This study was performed in line with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of Bern (12.01.2021./No. 022021). All participants were compensated with 2,00 €.

3.2. Measures¹

3.2.1. Personality traits

We relied on the German translation of the Ten Items Personality Inventory (TIPI; Muck et al., 2007), whereby respondents had to rate themselves on ten statements on a 7-point Likert scale (e.g., “I see myself as sympathetic, warm”). Each of the personality dimensions was captured with two items. Although longer batteries capture more nuances and produce stronger associations (Bakker & Lelkes, 2018), the German translation of the TIPI has been shown to be a convincing proxy for longer measurements of personality traits (Muck et al., 2007).

3.2.2. Resistance strategies

The different resistance strategies – avoidance, contesting, empowering, and negative affect – were assessed via several questions. These resistance categories have been confirmed with a second-order confirmatory analysis using structural equation modeling (see Table B.1 in online Appendix B). Unless specified otherwise, all items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (‘strongly disagree’ to ‘strongly agree’).

To assess if participants used *avoidance* techniques, they were asked what additional information they would be interested in reading. The participants could choose between information from (1) the pro-committee, (2) the contra-committee, (3) both, or (4) none. The final scale ranged from 0 ‘non-avoidant’ to 1 ‘avoidant’, whereby individuals interested in information *against* their initial opinion were coded as 0, and those that chose information *in line* with their opinion were coded as 1. The remaining participants were coded as 0.5. The final variable was forced into a 0–100 scale ($M = 56.4$; $SD = 21.9$). As allowing individuals to skip the dissonant message would have jeopardized the measurement of the remaining resistance variables, participants had no choice but to be exposed to the controversial message. As such, this measure taps into a general behavior and should be understood as a tendency to avoid incongruent information.

Contesting comprises counterarguing, source derogation, and the derogation of the persuasive tactic. Counterarguing was measured with two items that asked if respondents refuted or doubted the arguments ($\alpha = 0.77$). To assess source derogation, participants were asked to what extent they thought the source was trustworthy, credible, and had a high level of expertise ($\alpha = 0.93$). Three items captured to what extent people dismissed the persuasive tactic (e.g., “The committee tried to manipulate the readers (...)”); adapted from Cotte et al., 2005; $\alpha = 0.84$). The overarching resistance category (i.e., contesting) was computed by forcing each resistance measure (e.g., counterarguing) into a 0–100 scale and averaging their mean across variables ($M = 53.4$; $SD = 18.7$; $\alpha = 0.78$).

To capture *empowering strategies*, we measured if participants engaged in attitude bolstering, social validation, and self-assertion. The former included two items (e.g., “I made a mental list of the reasons in support of my perspective”; $\alpha = 0.56$) (Briñol et al., 2003). The same battery of questions also included one item for social validation (i.e., “I

thought about people that share the same opinion (...)”) and two items for self-assertion (e.g., “I thought that no argument would change my opinion (...)”; $\alpha = 0.79$) (Zuwerink Jacks & Cameron, 2003). The overarching score for empowering was again computed by forcing each measure into a 0–100 scale ($M = 52.1$; $SD = 16.9$; $\alpha = 0.47$).

Finally, negative affect was captured by asking the participants if the statement made them angry or irritated them ($\alpha = 0.68$). The final variable was again forced into a 0–100 scale ($M = 42.3$; $SD = 23.5$).

Additionally, we averaged all eight separate batteries into an additive resistance index ($\alpha = 0.67$), which we also forced onto a 0–100 range ($M = 51.9$, $SD = 12.9$).

3.2.3. Covariates

The covariates include the participants’ age, gender, education, political interest, and ideology. Other controls relevant to this specific study include participants’ religiosity ($M = 4.2/10$, $SD = 3.1$); religious affiliation (2 % ‘Muslim’); respondents’ feelings towards Muslims ($M = 47.5/100$, $SD = 27.8$); and an index of three statements that captured respondents’ opinion on gender equality in Switzerland ($\alpha = 0.82$; $M = 3.2/7$, $SD = 1.4$; see Tougas et al., 1995). Our models also control for issue importance ($M = 4.5/10$, $SD = 3.6$) and political knowledge, measured via a series of factual questions about Swiss politics, Islam in Switzerland, and the burqa. While the scale’s reliability is relatively average ($\alpha = 0.51$), the measure, in our opinion, validly reflects increasing levels of political and issue knowledge. The knowledge scale ranges between 0 and 9 ($M = 3.7$, $SD = 1.8$). Finally, the models control for respondents’ initial opinion about the initiative and opinion extremity, which was computed by folding the initial opinion scale ($M = 3.1/5$, $SD = 1.7$) (see Table B.2 in Appendix B for descriptive statistics).

4. Results

We regressed the four resistance strategies and the general resistance index on people’s personality traits. Results are illustrated in Fig. 1; the coefficients are obtained from linear regressions run on standardized variables ($M = 0$, $SD = 1$) and can, thus, be interpreted as “scale free” estimates of the effects of each predictor on the resistance strategies (effect size). Full results with non-standardized variables are in Table C.1 and C.2 in Appendix C.

Against all our expectations, we failed to detect any significant effect of openness on any of the resistance strategies (H1a-c).

Conscientiousness is associated with lower use of the four resistance strategies. The effect is not significant for avoidance strategies, but its direction is clear and particularly strong for negative affect: the average use of negative affect (marginal effects, controlling for all other covariates at their mean value) drops from about 54/100 points for respondents low on conscientiousness to about 39 points for those very high on this trait. We, thus, accept H2a.

Unexpectedly, extraversion is positively associated with empowering strategies. Although the relationships between extraversion, avoidance, and contesting point in the expected direction, they are not statistically significant, which is why we reject H3a and H3b.

As hypothesized, agreeableness is strongly associated with avoidance strategies (H4a). The average level of avoidance goes from about 47/100 for respondents very low on agreeableness to >60 for those very high on this trait – an increase of >13 percentage points. Our models also show a positive association between agreeableness and empowering strategies. Contesting strategies and negative affect are not related to agreeableness, which is why we reject H4b and H4c.

Finally, neuroticism is associated with a somewhat greater use of contesting ($p < 0.1$), a weaker use of empowering ($p < 0.1$), and, notably, a stronger use of negative affect. The average use of this last strategy rises from about 36/100 points for respondents low in neuroticism to about 56 points for those high on this trait – an increase of 20 percentage points. We, thus, accept H5a. Because we did not find any significant effects for avoidance strategies, we must reject H5b.

¹ See Appendix E for the wording of the questions

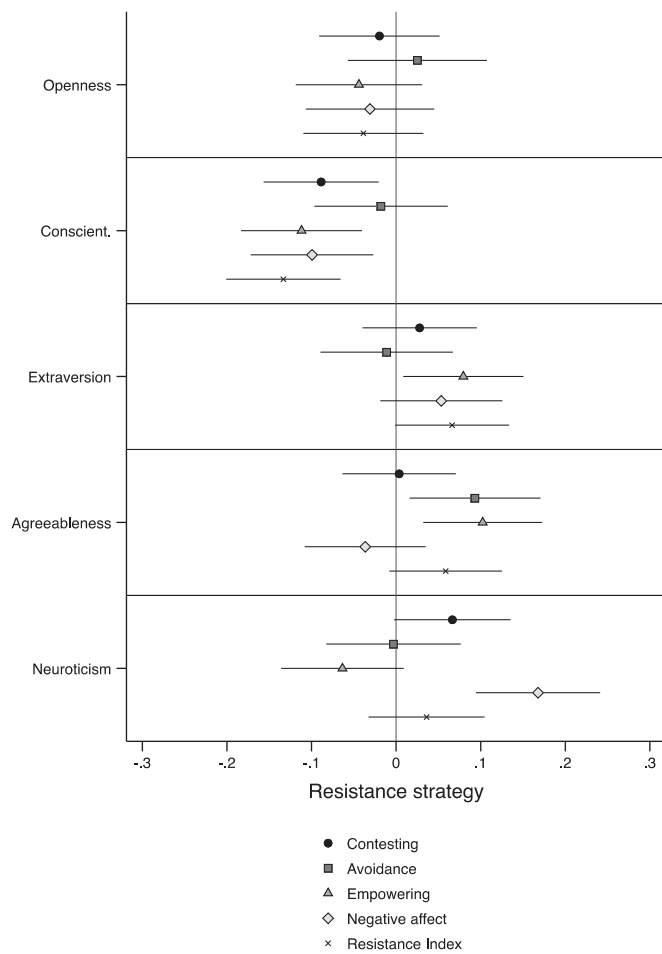


Fig. 1. Big Five and resistance strategies; coefficient plot. Note. The figure reports results of five different models, one per resistance strategy. Regression coefficients with 95 % confidence intervals, all variables standardized, including the dependent variables ($M = 0, SD = 1$). Full results of models with original variables are in Tables C.1 and C.2 (Appendix C). All models include the full set of covariates.

Looking at the additive index of resistance, additional models indicate a strong and negative effect of conscientiousness, followed by weaker positive effects of extraversion and agreeableness ($p < 0.1$).

Fig. 2 replicates the same analyses but tests for the effect of the two underlying “meta-traits” of plasticity and stability (see Table C.3 and C.4 in Appendix C for full results). The former reflects high levels of extraversion and openness and mirrors the desire “to explore and engage flexibly with novelty, in both behavior and cognition” (DeYoung, 2006, p.1138). The latter reflects high levels of agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability (reverse of neuroticism) and, thus, indicates a proclivity “to maintain stability and avoid disruption in emotional, social, and motivational domains” (DeYoung, 2006, p.1138).

Only stability is associated with resistance strategies in a meaningful way; respondents higher on this meta-trait are significantly less likely to engage in contesting and negative affect, likely reflecting the negative effect of conscientiousness and emotional stability shown beforehand on these two strategies. Stability, furthermore, reduces resistance more generally (index).

5. Discussion

Following research that showed that people’s reaction to social conflict and, importantly, opposing political views varies with their predispositions, this study examined the role of personality in people’s

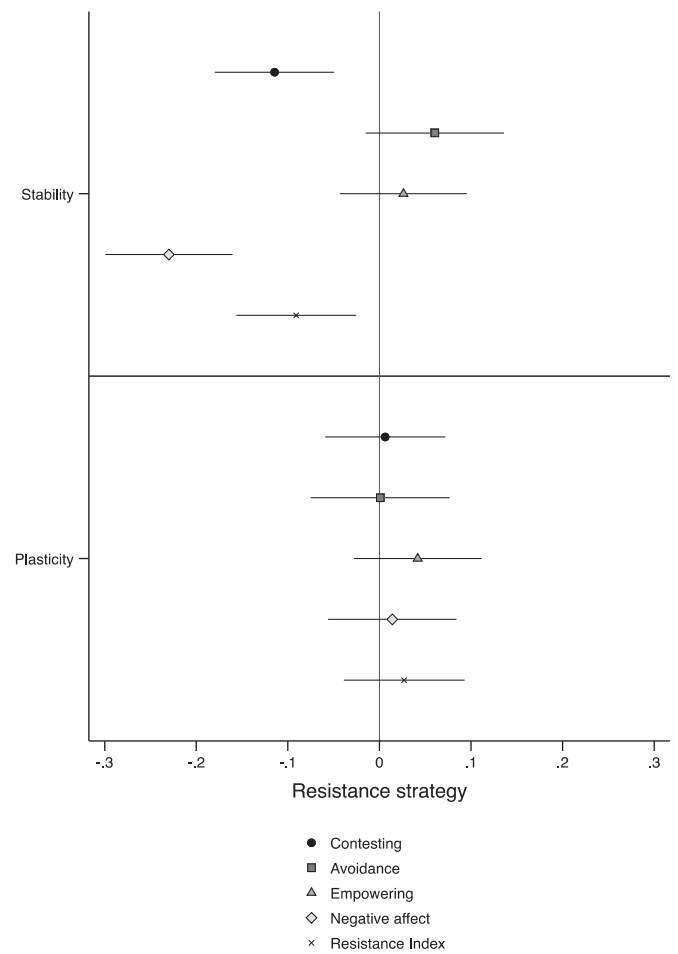


Fig. 2. Meta-traits and resistance strategies; coefficient plot. Note. The figure reports results of five different models, one per resistance strategy. Regression coefficients with 95 % confidence intervals, all variables standardized, including the dependent variables ($M = 0, SD = 1$). Full results of models with original variables are in Tables C.3 and C.4 (Appendix C). All models include the full set of covariates.

resistance against incongruent political opinions. To do so, we exposed participants to a tailored counterargument on a political issue and analyzed their responses in form of four distinct types of resistance strategies, namely contesting, avoidance, empowering, and negative affect.

In line with a recent study on the effect of personality on the evaluation of political counterarguments, and opinion change (Nai et al., 2023), we did not find any association between openness and resistance to opposing political views. Given that openness is one of the personality traits most often related to political behavior (e.g., Mondak, 2010), we suspect that these nonsignificant results are a product of competing lower-level facets, however. Future research should, thus, replicate these findings with longer inventories that allow a more “granular identification of motivational, emotional, and behavioral tendencies” (Xu et al., 2021, p.755).

Conscientious individuals were relatively cautious about resisting opposing political views and were especially unlikely to experience negative affect. While we cannot rule out that these results come from a response bias – that is, conscientious individuals are more wary to “openly” challenge opposing positions because they want to comply with social norms –, their lack of engagement might reflect their tendency to inhibit their impulses. Because conscientious individuals are susceptible to directions from authority figures (Alkiş & Taşkaya Temizel, 2015), they might have also responded to the source of the

counter-attitudinal message, which we operationalized as an official referendum committee. Future research should explore these source cues more carefully.

Next, we find that extraverted individuals resist opposing political views by bolstering their prior political views. A closer look at the index of empowering strategies reveals that this effect is driven by social validation (i.e., reminding oneself that significant others share the same opinion). Because extraverts are social in nature, they might seek reassurance from their social environment when their opinions are challenged. This idea seems to align with earlier research that suggests that extraverts are significantly affected by the opinions of their peers (Alkiş & Taşkaya Temizel, 2015).

Similar to extraverts, agreeable individuals value the ideas of their social circle (Alkiş & Taşkaya Temizel, 2015). In line with this, our data shows that agreeable individuals remind themselves that others in their environment share their views. However, if they can, they will avoid confrontation with alternative political information. Out of the Big Five, agreeable individuals also seem the most resistant. Although surprising, this finding somewhat aligns with previous studies that emphasized the importance of conflict-orientation in understanding people's reactions to political disagreement (e.g., Testa et al., 2014).

Although neurotic individuals react to opposing views with negative affect, they do not seem to avoid such confrontation. Instead of withdrawing from the confrontation – which we hypothesized – we have indications that they engage with the opposing views through contesting and empowering strategies, even if only marginally. Thus, the expected mechanism might be reversed: neurotic individuals become activated precisely because they find counter-attitudinal views emotionally upsetting. This logic aligns with previous findings that show that the strongest motive for neurotic individuals to comment on news stories is when the story affects them emotionally (Barnes et al., 2018).

5.1. Limitations

This article does not come without limitations: first, several resistance strategies were assessed with short forms of established scales. Although most measurements showed good reliability, shorter measurements can impede construct validity. Second, we relied on self-reported measures, which might be subject to response bias. We urge future research to replicate these findings using longer, established measurements and, where possible, thought-listing techniques to examine people's response to controversial information. Next, we used a relatively short 10-item personality battery to examine the Big Five, which fails to capture the subdimensions of the personality traits. Last, we specifically focused on resistance to opposing political views and thereby, neglected the possibility of more positive responses.

5.2. Implications

Arguing for the importance of cross-cutting exposure for a functioning democracy, most of the literature focused on how personality influences people's willingness to expose themselves to political disagreement. The findings of this study emphasize the need to go beyond the question of *who* is exposed to incongruent information and ask *how* these individuals react to that information. From a theoretical perspective, this study, thus, adds to the literature by looking at an additional step in the information processing sequence which begins with the exposure to a communication, continues with the processing and is followed by the evaluation of that information (Minson & Chen, 2022, p. 94). In terms of personality research more broadly, this study again illuminates the predictive power of personality and highlights that these stable characteristics influence behavioral and attitudinal tendencies above and beyond specific situational contexts (e.g., organizational conflict).

From a broader societal perspective, this study can shed new light on the psychological mechanism related to political extremism, including

recent events such as the violent occupation of government buildings in the US and Brazil. In a world increasingly defined by political contrasts and ideological oppositions, knowing why and under which conditions citizens resist incongruent political views likely matters for scholars, public officials, and democracy practitioners alike.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Chiara Valli: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition. **Alessandro Nai:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

All data, codes, and appendices are available at the following Open Science Foundation (OSF) repository: <https://osf.io/ut6c5/>

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Supplementary Material

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