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# They choose violence. Dark personality traits drive support for politically motivated violence in five democracies

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## ABSTRACT

The deep roots of support for politically driven violence remain under-investigated. In this article we propose what we believe is the first systematic multi-country examination of personality correlated support for political violence, with a particular focus on the dark side of personality (low honesty-humility, dark triad). Study 1 leverages survey data gathered in five countries – Argentina, Australia, Germany, Italy, and the USA (pooled  $N = 10,316$ ) – whereas Study 2 focuses on the USA ( $N = 1845$ ) but with a more nuanced measure of the dark traits. Both studies rely on a conservative design for the measure of support for political violence, based on vignettes depicting concrete violent acts perpetrated against members of the partisan out-group. Results across the two studies confirm the driving role of dark personality for support for political violence, in particular in Australia and the USA (Study 1), and especially psychopathy (Study 2). Data and materials are openly available for replication.

## 1. Introduction

Political violence is one of the defining features of contemporary democracies – from the violent storming of the US capitol in January 2021 to assassination attempts against leading candidates in Brazil and Argentina – highlighting the need for a comprehensive understanding of the root causes of violent partisan behaviors and attitudes. Propensity for political violence is influenced both by the societal and political context – e.g., degree of ethnic fragmentation or separatism (Brown & Boswell, 1997), strength of political party systems (Fjelde, 2020), etc. – as well as the characteristics of the individuals who would perpetrate these acts. While considerable evidence exists that links support for political violence with deep attitudinal constructions such as sensation seeking (Schumpe et al., 2020), uncertainty (Göttsche-Astrup, 2019), super-ego strength (Crawford, 1993), or trait aggressiveness (Kalmoe, 2014), only limited systematic evidence exists about the role of personality traits; furthermore this evidence relies on single-country studies. In one of the first systematic studies Crawford (1993) shows some evidence in this sense, but their study includes only a handful of traits that are part of contemporary personality inventories (extraversion, neuroticism), and is limited to a sample of adults from the Basque country. Göttsche-Astrup (2019) shows that in a sample of American

respondents a negative association exists between political violence and openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, whereas a positive association exists for extraversion; their analysis is however limited to the Big Five inventory (but see Göttsche-Astrup, 2021), and the USA. Pavlović and Wertag (2021) introduce a novel focus on the dark traits and show convincing evidence of a positive association between the dark side of personality and support for violence (see also Pavlović & Franc, 2023) – but the presented evidence is limited to a sample of Croatian students. Do these effects of personality traits hold in different societal and political contexts?

The strong effect of the dark side of personality – narcissism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism (the so-called “dark triad”; Furnham et al., 2013), but also low agreeableness and low honesty-humility (e.g., Pailing et al., 2014) – on attitudinal support for political violence should not come as a surprise. Considerable evidence links dark traits with more aggressive attitudes and behaviors such as reckless impulsivity (Jones & Paulhus, 2011), verbal sadism (Plouffe et al., 2017), bullying (Goodboy & Martin, 2015), cyber-aggression in adolescents (Pabian et al., 2015), Schadenfreude (James et al., 2014), physical and psychological intimate partner violence (Carton & Egan, 2017; Knight et al., 2018), youth delinquency (Alsheikh Ali, 2020), moral disengagement in offenders (Brugués & Caparrós, 2022), violent recidivism (Harris et al., 1991),

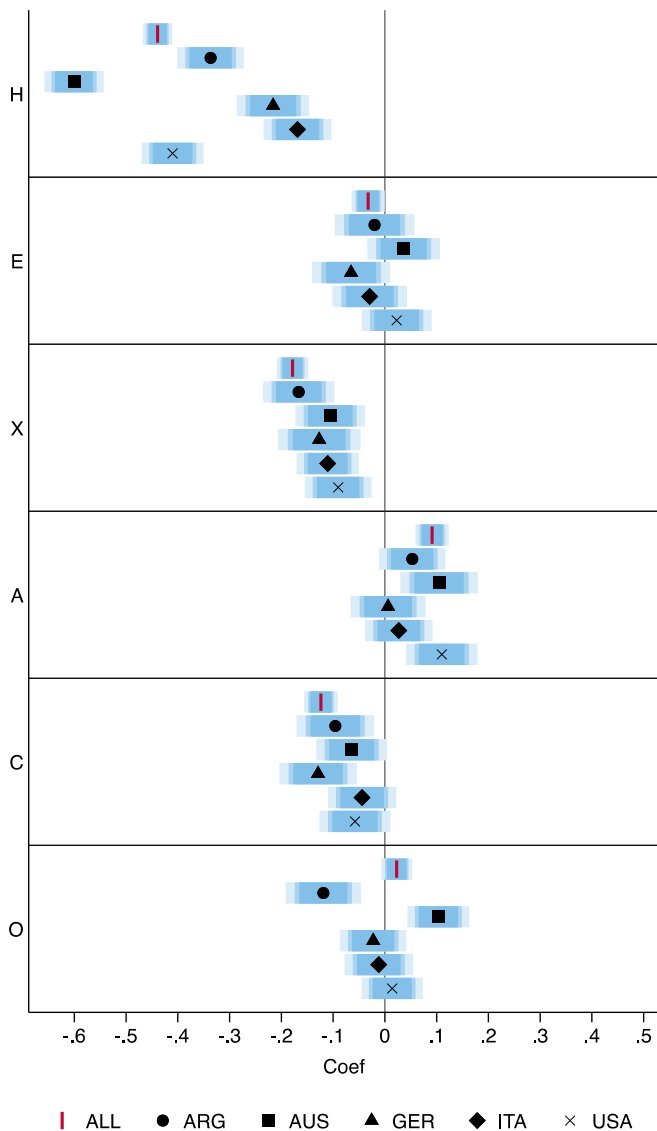
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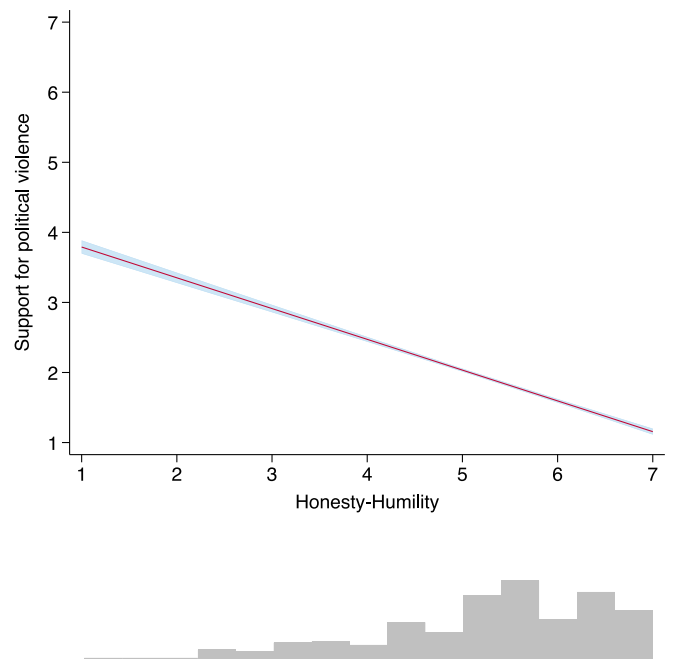


**Fig. 1.** Study 1: HEXACO and support for political violence (multi-countries). Note. Coefficient plot with 99 % (outer range, lightest color) 95 % (middle range), and 90 % (inner range, darkest color) confidence intervals. All models controlled by gender, age, and left-right self-positioning. Full results in Table A4 (Appendix A).  $N(\text{all countries}) = 8762$ ;  $N(\text{Argentina}) = 1,788$ ;  $N(\text{Australia}) = 1699$ ;  $N(\text{Germany}) = 1789$ ;  $N(\text{Italy}) = 1727$ ;  $N(\text{USA}) = 1759$ .

antisocial behaviors (Triberti et al., 2021), and a general disposition towards aggression (Jones & Neria, 2015).

In politics as well, dark personality traits have been associated with a marked preference for more bellicose attitudes and behaviors, such as preference for aggressive humor (Veselka et al., 2010), populist attitudes (Hofstetter & Filsinger, 2024; Pruyssers, 2021), susceptibility to political attacks and incivility (Nai & Maier, 2021), prejudice towards outgroups (Anderson & Cheers, 2018), negative partisan affect (for low agreeableness; Webster, 2018), political extremism (Duspara & Greitemeyer, 2017), and political radicalization (Chabrol et al., 2020; Corner et al., 2021).

Yet, for all this wealth of evidence, the role of (dark) personality traits for partisan radicalism – that is, support for violence motivated by political reasons – remains under investigated (but see Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2021), particularly in a nationally comparative perspective. In this article we propose what we believe is the first systematic multi-country investigation on the personality roots of support for political violence.



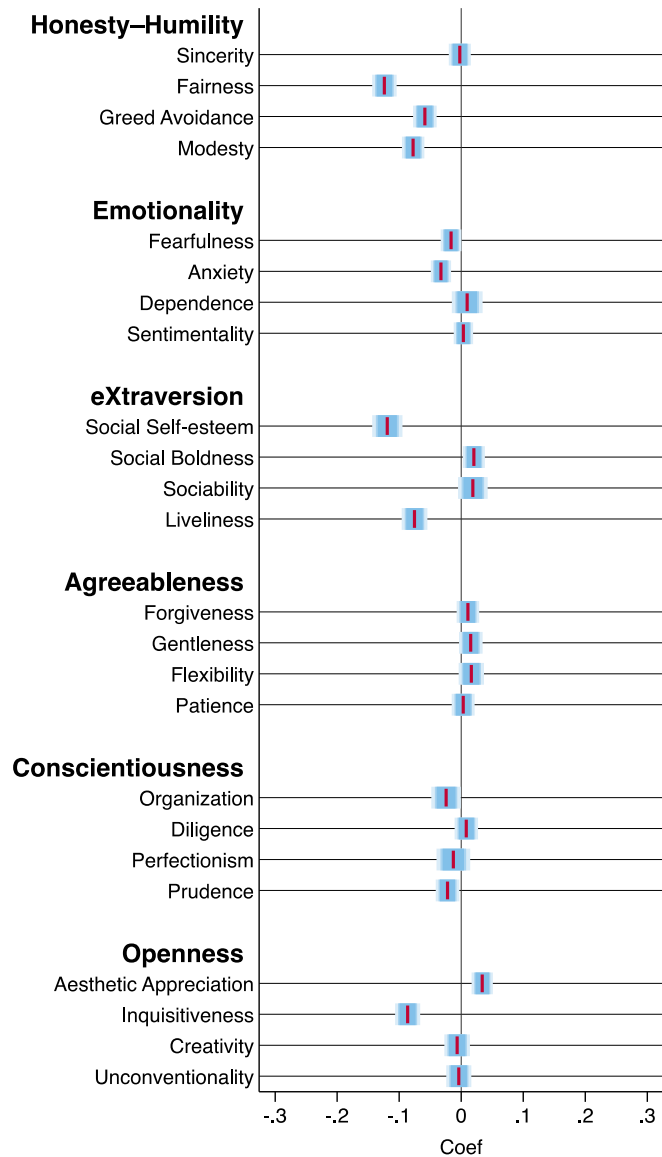
**Fig. 2.** Study 1: Honesty-Humility and support for political violence (all countries). Note. Marginal effects with 95 % confidence intervals. All other variables kept at their mean value.

Study 1 presents survey data gathered in five countries – Argentina, Australia, Germany, Italy, and the USA (pooled  $N = 10,316$ ); the study innovates by relying on a more complete measure of human personality (HEXACO inventory; Ashton & Lee, 2007), by introducing a conservative measure of support for political violence based on a vignette design (Westwood et al., 2022a); and by replicating the study directly across five different countries – thus reducing the risk of low external validity inherent in single-case studies (Meisenberg, 2015). Study 2 replicates the protocols of Study 1 with a new sample of US respondents ( $N = 1845$ ) but tests specifically for the separate effect of the three dark traits of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism.

Results across the two studies confirm the key driving role of dark personality for support for political violence, in particular in Australia and the USA (Study 1) and especially psychopathy (Study 2). Data and materials are available for replication at the following OSF repository: <https://osf.io/pq5ve/>

## 2. Study 1

Study 1 presents multi-country evidence on the association between personality traits and support for political violence. While some variation across countries should not come as unexpected – for instance, the effect of personality on support for violence should be particularly salient in countries where the latter is a rarer occurrence – it is not our goal to test assumptions about differences across countries. Increasing evidence supports the “similarity hypothesis” when it comes to variation of personality traits across the world (Kajonius & Mac Giolla, 2017; McCrae & Terracciano, 2005). This suggests that any differences across countries when it comes to the effect of personality traits on variables of interest – support for political violence, in our case – ought to come from the interaction between country characteristics and how specific personality traits are expressed or activated. A serious test of such an intuition would, in our opinion, require a much larger variety of countries than the ones we have at hand to be statistically meaningful. Rather, the multi-country nature of the data in Study 1 is leveraged, from an epistemological standpoint, to highlight the need to move away

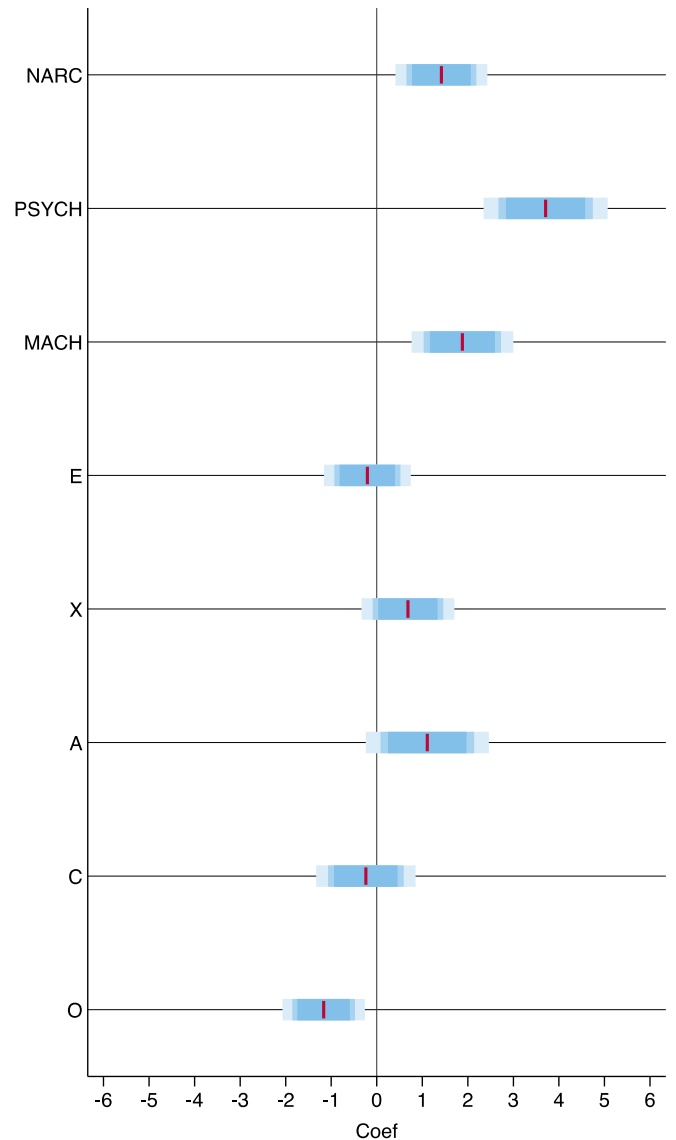


**Fig. 3.** Study 1: HEXACO and support for political violence (facets) (all countries).  
 Note. Coefficient plot with 99 % (outer range, lightest color) 95 % (middle range), and 90 % (inner range, darkest color) confidence intervals. All models controlled by gender, age, and left-right self-positioning. Full results in Table A6 (Appendix A).  
 N(all countries) = 8762.

from single-case studies when possible to enhance the ecological validity of the results (Holleman et al., 2020).

2.1. Participants

We leverage survey data gathered by the polling company Dynata, under our supervision, in Argentina (September 2022, N = 2045), Australia (September/October 2022, N = 1907), Germany (November 2022, N = 1914), Italy (January/February 2023, N = 2494), and the USA (July/August 2022, N = 1956). Final samples exclude respondents who failed an attention check (Berinsky et al., 2014), straight-liners, and respondents with inconsistent answers on two separate questions about partisan preferences. The pooled sample, adding all data across the five countries, includes N = 10,316 respondents. The surveys were identical in all cases (albeit in different languages). Table A1 (Appendix A) include descriptive statistics for the five samples.



**Fig. 4.** Study 2: Personality and support for political violence (USA).  
 Note. Coefficient plot with 99 % (outer range, lightest color) 95 % (middle range), and 90 % (inner range, darkest color) confidence intervals. All models controlled by gender, age, and left-right self-positioning. Full results in Table D3 (Appendix D).  
 N(USA) = 1818.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Personality

Personality traits are measured via the 24-item brief HEXACO inventory (BHI; De Vries, 2013). For each of the six traits, respondents had to indicate whether they agree or disagree with a series of four statements, such as “I make sure that things are in the right spot” (for conscientiousness), “I am afraid of feeling pain” for emotionality, or “I easily approach strangers” (for extraversion) (from 1 “disagree strongly” to 7 “agree strongly”). After recoding the reversed statements, each of the six HEXACO traits is measured by simply averaging the four related statements, which yields six 1–7 scales. Table C1 (Appendix C) reports the precise wording for all items, and highlights the different facets per trait. Reliability scores for some of the traits are at times low (Table A2, Appendix A). This is not fully unexpected. Short scales to measure personality have been known to yield at times low reliability scores (McCrae et al., 2011), because designed to maximize validity over

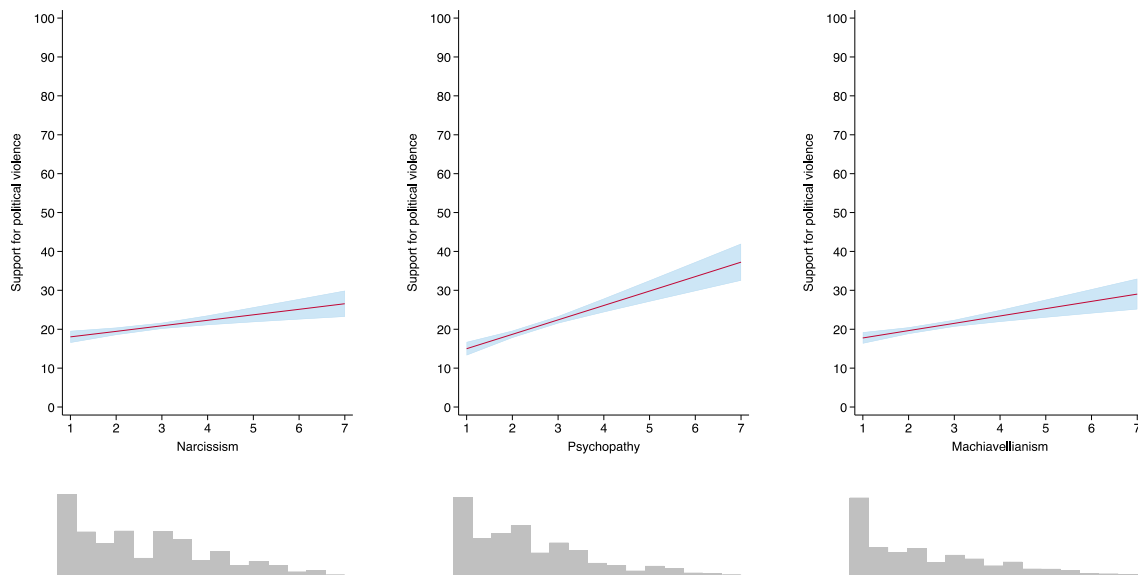


Fig. 5. Study 2: Dark traits and support for political violence (USA).

Note. Marginal effects with 95 % confidence intervals. All other variables kept at their mean value.

internal psychometric consistency (reliability); scales with many items “can afford to bolster internal consistency by using several items with high content overlap [whereas short scales emphasize] content validity considerations, resulting in lower inter-item correlations than is typical of more homogenous scales. [...] These scales provide an example of how validity can exceed reliability” (Gosling et al., 2003, p. 516).

This being said, we have computed alternative measures for personality traits by removing selected items when this increased the reliability score. This procedure yielded an average increase in Cronbach’s alpha of 0.08 across all traits (see Table A3). Importantly, replicating our analysis using these adjusted variables instead yields very comparable results (Table A5).

### 2.2.2. Support for political violence

In all five countries we measured support for political violence as respondents’ support for a concrete partisan violent act committed in their country against a person from the party they dislike the most (out-party).<sup>1</sup> We exposed respondents to a short mock newspaper article describing a violent act, and asked them afterwards how they felt about it. The article described a person violently assaulting voters – explicitly identified as supporters of respondent’s out-party – during a private social gathering. We designed three different versions of the mock article, cueing increasing levels of severity of the violent act: in the first version the aggressor punches someone in the face, in the second version he hits someone with a baseball bat, and in the third version he shoots someone in the chest. Respondents were shown randomly one of the three versions of the article (full wording of the three versions is in Appendix B; Fig. B1 presents an example of what respondents saw).

After reading the article respondents were asked whether they agree or disagree with three statements: “I support the action of [aggressor]”,

<sup>1</sup> In all countries, in- and out-party preferences were measured beforehand by asking respondents to identify their preferred and most disliked party from a list. In Argentina, Germany and Italy, all multiparty systems, two separate questions were asked, respectively, for the most liked and most disliked party. In the USA and Australia, virtually two-party systems, a single question asked respondents to select which of the two main parties they “feel the closest to, even if you feel only marginally close to it. If you do not feel close to any of the two parties at all, please select the party you dislike the least.” In these two countries, the selected choice is their in-party, and the other one is the out-party.

“The actions of [aggressor] could under some circumstances be justified”, and “[aggressor] should face criminal charges” (from 1 “disagree strongly” to 7 “agree strongly”). After reversing the third statement, support for the violent act is simply calculated as the average agreement across the three statements, which yields a 1–7 scale (see Table A2, Appendix A, for reliability scores). The average level of support for the violent act is very low across all respondents ( $M = 1.89$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ , in the pooled sample), and varies between  $M = 1.60$  ( $SD = 0.90$ ) in Italy and  $M = 2.41$  ( $SD = 1.63$ ) in Australia. Confirming a successful manipulation of the act severity, the average level of support decreases from  $M = 2.16$  ( $SD = 1.26$ ) for the punch to  $M = 1.64$  ( $SD = 1.15$ ) for shooting someone;  $F(2, 9720) = 223.25$ ,  $p < .001$  (pooled data).

This vignette design, inspired by the materials in Westwood et al. (2022a), is intended to grant a realistic grounding to the measurement of support for political violence, which is traditionally measured via attitudinal scales (e.g., Göttsche-Astrup, 2021). For instance, the scale discussed in Kalmoe (2014) includes statements such as “Sometimes the only way to stop bad government is with physical force” or “Some of the problems citizens have with government could be fixed with a few well-aimed bullets” (see also Kalmoe & Mason, 2022, 2022a). While certainly conceptually valid, and having led to important insights into the dynamics of radical partisanship, these attitudinal scales might tend to overestimate the magnitude of the problem (Westwood et al., 2022a, 2022b; but see the answer by Kalmoe & Mason, 2022b), because they are based on abstract and hypothetical statements. Asking respondents whether they explicitly support a concrete violent act, as we do, likely produces a more grounded and realistic estimate – and quite likely a more conservative one. The questionnaire also included Kalmoe (2014)’s battery for political violence, which asks respondents whether they agree or disagree with a series of five statements such as “When politicians are damaging the country, citizens should send threats to scare them straight” or “Citizens upset by government should never use violence to express their feelings” (reversed) (from 1 “disagree strongly” to 7 “agree strongly”). After recoding the reversed statement, attitudinal support for political violence is calculated as the average agreement across the five statements, which yields a 1–7 scale ( $M = 2.17$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ) (see table A2, Appendix A, for reliability scores). These two scales are strongly correlated,  $r(9721) = 0.67$ ,  $p < .001$ . Yet, average scores seem to suggest that, indeed, our scale yields a more conservative estimate, in particular among respondents exposed to the most violent of the acts (shooting a political opponent); Fig. A1 in Appendix A shows the

comparison of all scales.

### 2.3. Results

Fig. 1 presents the results of six OLS regressions where respondents' support for political violence was regressed on their personality profile (HEXACO), controlled by gender (female, 0/1), age in years, and self-reported positioning on a 0–10 left-right scale. The graph reports unstandardized regression coefficients with 95 % confidence intervals, first for the pooled dataset (topmost coefficient), then for each of the five country samples separately. Full results are in Table A4 (Appendix A).

The clearest trend that emerges from Fig. 1 is the overwhelming negative effect of honesty-humility in the pooled dataset, but also in all countries separately – in particular, in Australia and the USA. In line with the expectation that darker personality profiles tend to converge towards more radical behaviors, low honesty-humility strongly increases support for specific violent acts. The magnitude of the effect is substantiated with marginal effects in Fig. 2 (pooled data). As shown, the estimated average support for political violence increases from 1.4 among respondents with higher than average ( $M + 1SD$ ) levels of honesty-humility to 2.4 among respondents with lower than average ( $M - 1SD$ ) levels of honesty-humility – which represents an increase of 70 % in absolute terms. By comparison, the effect of the other five traits is much more subdued.

Fig. A2 (Appendix A) replicates the same analysis but separately for the three types of violent acts, in increasing order of severity: punching a political opponent in the face, hitting them with a baseball bat, and shooting them in the chest. Some marginal differences appear. For instance, in Argentina increasing levels of severity of the act reinforce the negative effect of openness,  $b = -0.09$ ,  $t(1772) = -2.67$ ,  $p = .008$ , and reinforce the positive effect of agreeableness,  $b = 0.05$ ,  $t(1772) = 1.77$ ,  $p = .076$  (models with interaction terms, see materials in OSF repository). But, broadly speaking, the trends discussed above hold regardless of the severity of the act. Consistent trends exist also when replicating the main analyses using instead the measures of personality corrected to increase reliability (Fig. A3, Table A5), and when using Kalmoe (2014)'s battery of political violence as dependent variable (Fig. A5).

Fig. 3, finally, replicates the main analyses (pooled dataset only) but tests for the direct effect of all facets, instead of the six separate traits. Results show some interesting within-trait variation. For instance, all honesty-humility facets consistently reduce support for violence, except for sincerity (no significant effect); inversely, while only a very weak general effect for extraversion was found in Fig. 1, two of its facets seem to have a much more substantive role in depressing support for violence (social self-esteem, and liveliness). Fig. A4 (Appendix A) replicates the analysis for the five countries separately.

## 3. Study 2

### 3.1. Participants

In light of the strong effect of honesty-humility in Study 1, Study 2 replicates the same design and procedure of Study 1, but with a more nuanced focus on the dark side of personality. Data comes from a survey we fielded in the USA in September 2023 on a convenience sample of respondents surveyed via CloudResearch, which pre-vets Amazon's MTurk respondents to increase data quality. Evidence exists that it provides higher quality samples than MTurk (e.g., Douglas et al., 2023). The final sample exclude respondents who failed an attention check and straight-liners, and includes  $N = 1845$  respondents. 59.9 % of respondents are female, 60.8 % have a university degree, and the average respondent is 46.2 years old ( $SD = 14.0$ ). Respondents report an average ideology, scoring relatively in the middle of 0–10 scales for left-right self-positioning ( $M = 4.6$ ,  $SD = 3.2$ ).

### 3.2. Measures

#### 3.2.1. Personality

The survey included a specific battery to measure the dark traits (Dirty Dozen inventory; Jonason & Webster, 2010). For each of the three dark traits respondents had to evaluate four statements, such as "I tend to lack remorse" and "I tend to not be too concerned with morality or the morality of my actions" for psychopathy (from 1 "disagree strongly" to 7 "agree strongly"). Separate variables for the dark traits are computed by averaging their respective statements, which yields three 1–7 variables (Narcissism:  $M = 2.74$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ; Psychopathy:  $M = 2.50$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ; Machiavellianism:  $M = 2.47$ ,  $SD = 1.40$ ). The survey also included a battery for the Big Five, which we include to ensure comparability of the models with Study 1. The BFI-S-2 inventory (Rammstedt et al., 2020) is a battery which includes six statements for each of the five traits, e.g., for agreeableness, whether respondents see themselves as a person who "assumes the best about people" (from 1 "strongly disagree" to 7 "strongly agree"). See Table D1 (Appendix D) for descriptive statistics, and Table D2 for reliability scores.

#### 3.2.2. Support for political violence

We replicate here the protocols discussed in Study 1 – respondents were asked to read a mock newspaper article describing a violent act committed against a member of the out-party, and were asked whether they support such act – but with three differences. First, all respondents saw the same vignette, in which the perpetrator attacks a member of the out-party with a baseball bat. Compared to the text in Study 1, severity was increased here by explicitly mentioning that "The victim had to be transported to the hospital." Second, the text here is more explicit that the perpetrator is part of the respondent's in-party – that is, supports the same party as the respondent. While this information was only indirectly specified in Study 1, in Study 2 the text mentions clearly that the perpetrator "typically votes for [IN-PARTY]." See Appendix E for the full text. Third, on top of being asked whether they support the act, whether it could be justifiable, and whether the perpetrator should face charges (as in Study 1), respondents were also asked whether they agree or disagree that "These things happen all the time in America", and the perpetrator "was likely provoked to react like that" (using a slider, from 0 "disagree strongly" to 100 "agree strongly"). After recoding the reverse statements, support for the violent act is measured as the average across the five statements ( $M = 20.58$ ,  $SD = 18.37$ ).

### 3.3. Results

Fig. 4 replicates the same models discussed for Study 1, with the new data. The model is again controlled by gender (female 0/1), age in years, and left-right scale (0–10). Full results are in Table D3 (Appendix C). The effect of the dark traits appears rather clearly, in particular for Machiavellianism and psychopathy. Confirming trends in Study 1, the dark side of personality is significantly associated with upticks in support for political violence.

Fig. 5 substantiates the effects of the three dark traits with marginal effects with 95 % confidence intervals. The effect, in particular for psychopathy appears clearly. For this trait, the estimated average support for political violence increases from 15.7 among respondents with lower than average ( $M - 1SD$ ) levels of psychopathy to 25.4 among respondents with higher than average ( $M + 1SD$ ) levels of psychopathy – which represents an increase of 60 % in absolute terms.

## 4. Discussion

Across the two studies, a clear result emerges: attitudinal support for political violence – conservatively measured, in both studies, as respondents' support for specific violent acts committed against members of their partisan out-group (Westwood et al., 2022a) – is a strong positive function of underlying dark personality traits. In Study 1 the

negative effect of honesty-humility dwarfs the effect of all other traits – in all countries, but in particular in Australia and the USA. The same was found in Study 2 with data from American respondents for the Dark Triad, in particular psychopathy. These results confirm existing trends found for the American case (Götzsche-Astrup, 2021), and are generally consistent with literature indicating a proclivity for aggressive attitudes and behaviors among high dark personality individuals (Chabrol et al., 2020; James et al., 2014; Jones & Neria, 2015; Jones & Paulhus, 2011).

These results are important in light of the potential dramatic consequences of attitudinal support for political violence – in particular, in a climate increasingly characterized by credible threats and concrete acts of radical partisanship. While general support for political violence in the two studies remain relatively low, also due to the conservative nature of the measurement, it is nonetheless suggestive of a disturbing radical trend. However, our results also point to the importance of the socio-political context when considering the effects of personality traits on support for political violence – in line with evidence showing that the contribution of (dark) personality traits to explain other facets of political bellicosity, such as populist attitudes, is also strongly context-dependent (Hofstetter & Filsinger, 2024) – and thus the importance of confirming results in more than a single country. Future research should strive to better understand the interaction of personality traits and specific socio-political contexts.

## Replication data and code

<https://osf.io/pq5ve/>.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Alessandro Nai:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Elizabeth L. Young:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Conceptualization.

## Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Data availability

Data and materials are available for replication at the following OSF repository: <https://osf.io/pq5ve/>

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2024.112794>.

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