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Stay Loyal or Exit the Party? How Openness to Experience and Extroversion Explain Vote Switching

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Following Hirschman, voters who are discontent with the party they voted for have two options: exit the party and vote for another or stay loyal. The inclination to exit or stay loyal is rooted in the Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality. We test our argument in two panel studies in Denmark and the United Kingdom. We find that citizens open to experience are more likely to switch parties since they are more likely to think about alternatives and take risks. Extroverts identify and commit themselves to organizations and stay loyal in Denmark, but we do not confirm this pattern in the United Kingdom. Our findings demonstrate that electoral volatility is, at least partly, rooted in personality.

KEY WORDS: vote switching, openness to experience, extroversion

Suppose a voter is discontent with the party she voted for because—for example—the party is mishandling government affairs. According to Hirschman's (1970) logic, she has two choices: (1) exit by voting for another party or (2) stay loyal to the party and voice discontent. The propensity to stay loyal or to exit varies among individuals (Hirschman 1970, 49) and is rooted in an individuals' personality. Personality traits—often conceptualized by the Five Factor Model (FFM) consisting of openness to experience, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness and neuroticism (Costa & McCrae, 1992)—are an important source of variation in political behavior. For example, these traits, and especially openness and conscientiousness, explain vote intention (Barbaranelli, Caprara, Vecchione, & Fraley, 2007), ideology (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling, & Ha, 2010; Mondak & Halperin, 2008), and partisanship (Gerber, Huber, Doherty, & Dowling, 2012). We propose that personality traits explain vote switching in two ways. First, individuals open to experience are more likely to switch votes as they are willing to consider new ideas, more likely to imagine alternatives, and more willing

to take risks. Second, extroverted individuals are likely to identify with a party, commit to organizations, and are dominant. For these reasons we expect extroverts to stay loyal to their party.

To evaluate these two claims, we present results from two multiwave panel studies from the United Kingdom and Denmark. The dependent variable expresses how often individuals switch vote intention (i.e., exit) in the panel study. In Denmark, we find that people who are open to experience are more likely to exit, and extroverts are more likely to stay loyal to their party. In the United Kingdom, we replicate our findings for openness, but not for extroversion. Our results are robust when controlling for political interest, external efficacy, ideology, and socioeconomic conditions.

Exit, Openness to Experience, and Vote Switching

Voters may vote for another party because of issue position changes, changes in social identification, as punishment or reward for economic conditions or because the party is incompetent on important issues (Bartels, 2012). However, some voters are highly *alert* and others more *inert* in using the exit option (Hirschman, 1970, p. 24), and we propose that this difference is rooted in the FFM trait openness to experience. Openness shapes the way individuals approach the world in terms of internal experience, interpersonal interactions, and social behavior (Costa & McCrae, 1992). People open to experience have a lively imagination, are curious and open-minded, have few behavioral inhibitions, and are willing to take risks.

We suggest that a trio of individual characteristics subsumed under openness predict switching vote intentions: need for cognition, imaginativeness, and risk-seeking behavior. First, openness makes individuals more willing to consider new ideas. For instance, partisans with a high need for cognition are more likely to engage in rational updating of information about political candidates (Arceneaux & Vander Wielen, 2013). Second, the willingness to imagine alternatives (Petersen & Aarøe, 2013) incites individuals to contemplate voting for other parties. Third, people who take risks are more likely to vote for new or unknown alternatives. Kam and Simas (2012) report that risk-seeking individuals are more likely to prefer a challenger over the incumbent despite uncertainty about the challenger's qualities. Conversely, people who are less open to experience are unwilling to consider new ideas, do not imagine new alternatives, and are too risk averse to change voting behavior. In sum, individuals open to experience switch votes because they are open-minded, engage in imaginative thinking, and are willing to take risks.

Loyalty, Extroversion, and Vote Switching

A loyalist cares about his organization and therefore “leaves no stone unturned before he resigns himself to the painful decision to withdraw or switch” (Hirschman, 1970, p. 83). This inclination towards loyalty is rooted in the FFM trait extroversion. We present three reasons why this is the case. First, extroverts are outgoing, socially engaged, and assertive. Therefore they are more likely than introverts to engage in political activity (Mondak, Hibbing, Seligson, & Anderson, 2010), to discuss politics (Hibbing, Ritchie, & Anderson, 2011), and to identify as a partisan (Gerber et al., 2012). Hence, extroverts are more likely to associate with a party. Second, extroversion predicts affective, continuance, and normative commitment to organizations (Erdheim, Wang, & Zickar, 2006). This means extroverts are more likely to stay committed to an organization. Third, extroverts are dominant and take on leadership roles (Bono & Judge, 2004). Therefore we expect that when extroverts disagree with their party, they are more likely to voice discontent than to silently exit. We expect that the higher people score on extroversion, the lower their propensity to switch vote. However, because extroverts are members of more social networks than introverts, one could also argue that extroverts are more exposed to

alternative perspectives and therefore are more likely to switch votes. Hibbing and colleagues (2011) demonstrate that even though extroverts are more likely to engage in discussions with people who have other views, they are *not* more likely to be influenced by these people. In sum, a larger network is not sufficient for extroverts to behave disloyally.

Neuroticism, Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, and Vote Switching

Do the other FFM traits influence vote switching? *Neuroticism* is associated with the tendency to experience negative affect such as fear, anger, guilt, insecurity, and vulnerability (Costa & McCrae, 1992). There are two mechanisms that link neuroticism to vote switching: (1) neurotic people are likely to become angry if their party does something they do not like and switch to another party; (2) alternatively, due to anxiety and insecurity neurotic people also act risk averse. Even if they are angry at their party, neurotics are not likely to switch votes because they do not like to take the risk of voting for a political alternative they do not know. We consider these two mechanisms equally likely, so we offer no directional hypothesis for neuroticism. *Conscientious* people prefer order, adhere to social norms, plan and organize tasks, control impulses, are goal-oriented, and are reluctant to change (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Because of this last characteristic, conscientious people could stay loyal. However, because they are goal-oriented, they may be more disappointed with their party if it does not keep its promises or fails to meet performance standards. For these two reasons we also have no directional hypothesis for conscientiousness. *Agreeableness* is characterized by modest, prosocial, and altruistic behavior (Costa & McCrae, 1992), and agreeable citizens are more likely to volunteer (Carlo, Okun, Knight, & de Guzman, 2005). Accordingly, agreeable citizens might be loyal to a party as they are “attracted to the communal and cooperative components of joining a political team” (Gerber et al., 2012, p. 661). However, agreeable individuals also avoid any sort of conflict (Park & Antonioni, 2007), and politics is of course about conflict. Therefore, we have no directional expectations about the effect of agreeableness on vote switching.

Motivational Determinants of Vote Switching

Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954) characterized “floating voters” as citizens with less attention to politics. Indeed, politically interested individuals follow politics more closely than noninterested individuals and are less affected by short-term campaign effects (Converse, 1962; Dassonneville, 2012; Kuhn, 2009; Van der Meer, van Elsas, Lubbe, & van der Brug, 2015). Moreover, citizens with a strong sense of external efficacy think that they can make a difference in politics, that elected officials will listen to their grievances, and that therefore they have a strong tendency to believe in the effectiveness of voice as compared to exit (Dassonneville, 2012; Zelle, 1995). We control for these alternative explanations but openness and extroversion also positively relate to interest and efficacy (Mondak & Halperin, 2008). We do not expect that interest or efficacy moderate the association between personality and vote switching as personality traits are causally prior to these motivations (Gerber et al., 2010). Still the effects of openness and extroversion may be suppressed or mediated by interest and efficacy. In our analyses, we evaluate the likelihood of suppression and mediation effects.

We also control for ideology. If left-leaning individuals are more likely to switch, then ideology could mediate the association between openness and vote switching due to the positive association between openness and left-wing ideology. Yet, if right-leaning individuals are more likely to switch votes, then ideology could suppress the association between openness and vote switching. Although we see no theoretical argument why left-leaning or right-leaning individuals shift votes more often, we do control for ideology.

Research Design

We use a two-wave panel study on political behavior and personality conducted in Denmark and the multiwave British Household Panel Survey (BHPS). The first wave of the Danish survey was distributed to 8,012 respondents between May 25 and June 6, 2010. Respondents were randomly drawn from an internet panel of 400,000 Danes, and 3,612 people responded (45% response rate). The second wave was fielded between October 26 and November 15, 2011—a month after the general election on September 15—to 2,840 of the 3,612 respondents who were still active in the panel: 1,972 persons from the first wave answered the survey (69% response rate). We use four waves (15–18) of the BHPS. We selected individuals from 2005 onwards, as the personality battery was included for the first time in this wave. We restricted our sample to participants who reside in England and were 18 years or older in 2005. This resulted in a panel of over 3,500 individuals who answered in all four waves between 2005 and 2008.

From the Danish study we use two items from the two waves to create the dependent variable. The first item asks: “Which party did you vote for in the last election?”; the second item asks: “Which party would you vote for if an election were held tomorrow?” Our dependent variable is the count of the number of shifts in party preference. The maximum number of shifts is three. For instance, this occurs if someone indicated in wave 1 to have voted for the Liberals in 2007 and will vote for the

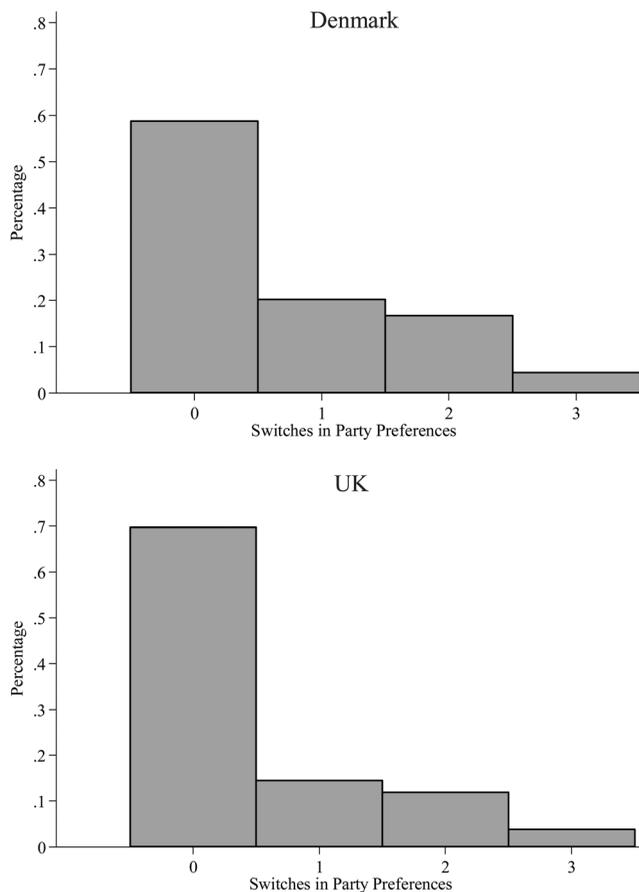


Figure 1. Observed party preference switches.

Social Liberals in 2010, but they indicate in wave 2 to have actually voted Social Democrats in 2010 and will vote for the Socialist People's Party at the next election.¹

From the British data, we construct a similar variable using items on party preferences included in the four waves—namely “Which party do you feel closest to?”—and if people did not indicate a party, they were asked “Which party would you vote for tomorrow?” We assume that it is likely that people who feel close to a party also vote for that party (Blais, Gidengil, Nadeau, & Nevitte, 2001). Also in the United Kingdom, our dependent variable ranges from 0, indicating no declared changes in party preference, to 3, indicating that the respondent changed party preference at each point.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of party preference shifts in the Danish (upper panel) and United Kingdom (lower panel) samples. In our Danish sample, approximately 60% of the respondents declared no shifts in party preference, 35% declared one or two shifts, and approximately 5% declared three shifts. In the U.K. sample, we see less change in party preference: approximately 70% of the voters did not change their party preference, the number of respondents who change party preference one, two, or three times ranges from approximately 15 to roughly 5% of the respondents. This difference in party preference switches is not surprising given the difference in the number of parties in the multiparty system in Denmark and the two-and-a-half party system in the United Kingdom (Pedersen, 1979, p. 14).² The difference in political context tests the robustness of our hypotheses.

Our two samples consist of reliable and validated measures of the FFM traits. In the Danish sample, we use the 60-item NEO PI-R Short Version (Skovdahl-Hansen, Mortensen, & Schiøtz, 2004) which measures each trait using 12 items. In the U.K. sample, we use a 15-item version of the Big Five Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999) which measures each trait using three items. Donnellan and Lucas (2008) demonstrated that the 15-item version of the BFI is strongly correlated with the full BFI. In both samples, the Cronbach's alphas of the traits are acceptable.³

In the baseline model, we control for the SES variables age, sex, household income, and education. Additionally, in model 2, we control for the motivational determinants of vote switching. Political interest is measured using one item: “How interested are you in politics?” External efficacy is measured using two items such as “People like me have no influence on government decisions.” Ideology is measured using nine items in the Danish sample and three items in the U.K. sample. In both samples, our ideology measures tap into economic and social issues employing items such as “Homosexual relationships are wrong” and “It is the government's responsibility to provide a job for everyone who wants one.” The item wording and descriptive statistics of all variables can be found in the online supporting information, Appendices A (Denmark) and B (United Kingdom).

Results

Since our dependent variable is a count variable, we use negative binomial regressions. Table 1 shows the incidence ratios of our analyses of the Danish sample. Model 1 only includes the personality traits and SES controls. Openness is positively associated with the tendency to switch party preferences in model 1 ($p = 0.06$). When we add political interest, external efficacy, and political ideology

¹ Our dependent variable includes respondents (1-2%) who indicated they would not vote or vote blank. Results do not change if these respondents are excluded.

² There were no specific events in the political context in Denmark or the United Kingdom that resulted in more party preference switches in one specific year (see Table A4 in the supporting information for the Danish sample and Table B4 for the U.K. sample).

³ We tested whether personality traits were skewed due to attrition. In the Danish sample, we found small but significant mean differences for neuroticism, conscientiousness, and agreeableness. In the U.K. sample, we found small mean differences for conscientiousness and extroversion.

Table 1. Negative Binomial Regression on Number of Party Preference Switches (Denmark)

	1	2
Openness	1.56* (0.37)	2.46* (0.65)
Extroversion	0.46* (0.13)	0.49* (0.14)
Conscientiousness	0.91 (0.26)	0.89 (0.26)
Agreeableness	0.79 (0.17)	0.91 (0.21)
Neuroticism	0.84 (0.23)	0.78 (0.22)
Age	0.58* (0.10)	0.55* (0.10)
Female	1.03 (0.07)	1.02 (0.07)
Education (Ref. = Primary school)		
Vocational	1.07 (0.09)	1.09 (0.09)
Upper Secondary	1.11 (0.17)	1.18 (0.18)
Professional	0.92 (0.11)	1.01 (0.12)
Bachelor or higher	1.29* (0.16)	1.40* (0.18)
Household Income	0.86 (0.12)	0.91 (0.13)
Political Interest		0.70* (0.11)
External Efficacy		0.63* (0.09)
Political Ideology		1.84* (0.43)
Constant	1.37 (0.47)	1.07 (0.41)
N	1,728	1,696
LR Chi ²	35.29	56.93
Log likelihood	-1,916.43	-1,865.50

Note. Incidence Ratios with standard errors in parentheses reported.

* $p < 0.1$

in model 2, the incidence ratio of openness becomes much stronger.⁴ Interest, efficacy and left-wing ideology are negatively related to the probability of vote switching. Yet, these variables correlate positively with openness, which suggests that they suppress the association between openness and vote switching. This evokes speculation about the interplay between openness and these political motivational constructs. For example, an increase in political interest may weaken the positive effect of openness on vote switching.

Returning to direct association between openness and vote switching, in Figure 2 (panel A) we plot the predicted number of switches at different levels of openness (based on model 2). The figure shows that at one standard deviation below the mean of openness the predicted number of vote switches is 0.58 (95%CI = 0.52, 0.64), whereas the predicted number of vote

⁴ Inclusion of political interest, efficacy, and ideology separately does not change the results (Table A5).

switches is 0.77 (95%CI = 0.69, 0.85) at one standard deviation above the mean of openness. This effect is substantive as it is at par with the predicted switches in vote choice between respondents who are not interested in politics (0.77 switches [95%CI = 0.66, 0.88]) and those that are very interested in politics (0.61 switches [95%CI = 0.54, 0.67]). In sum, these analyses confirm that openness to experience predicts exit.

Focusing on extroversion, we find in model 1 an incidence ratio of 0.46 for extroversion. This indicates that higher extroversion means less vote switching. Because the effect of extroversion is almost unchanged in model 2 in which we control for interest and efficacy, we can conclude that these variables do not mediate the association between extroversion and vote switching. Based on model 2, Figure 2 (panel B) demonstrates that respondents one standard deviation below the mean of extroversion switch on average 0.74 times (95% CI = 0.66, 0.81), whereas those scoring one standard deviation above the mean switch on average 0.60 times (95%CI = 0.54, 0.66). The size of this effect is substantive as it is grossly at par with the party preferences switches between respondents not interested and respondents very interested in politics. We conclude that extroversion, as predicted, reduces vote switching.⁵

Turning to the U.K. study, Table 2 presents the results of the negative binomial regressions predicting the count of shifts in party preferences. Again, model 1 includes the personality traits and the SES control variables. We find an incidence ratio for openness to experience of 1.44 (significant at $p < 0.05$) once we control for interest, efficacy, and ideology in model 2.⁶ Figure 3 (based on model 2) demonstrates that an increase in openness is related to more party-preference switches. Specifically, respondents that score one standard deviation below the mean on openness switch on average 0.46 times (95%CI = 0.42, 0.50), while respondents that score one standard deviation above the mean on openness switch on average 0.53 times (95%CI = 0.48, 0.58). The effect of openness is not as substantive as the effect of political interest on party-preference switches. Specifically, respondents that are not interested in politics switch 0.63 times (95%CI = 0.56, 0.70), whereas the very interested in politics switch 0.35 times (95%CI = 0.30, 0.40). Hence, in the United Kingdom, openness also accounts for some of the variance in the inclination to switch party preferences.⁷

Extroversion is unrelated to party preference switches in the United Kingdom.⁸ We have two explanations for this null finding. First, in the U.K. study, personality is measured by only three items per trait, which means that the measures might not encapsulate the full variance of extroversion (Credé, Harms, Niehorster, & Gaye-Valentine, 2012, p. 876). We created a reduced extroversion measure in the Danish sample consisting of the three items that most closely resemble the items used to measure extroversion in the United Kingdom. We reran the analyses of the Danish sample using this brief measure and found that the effect of extroversion on party-preference switching disappears.⁹ Consequently, the relatively poor measurement of extroversion in the U.K. study could explain the null finding. Second, loyalty is more important if two or more alternatives are of almost equal utility (Hirschman, 1970), which is more likely to happen when there are several, similar parties to choose from as is the case in Denmark but not in the United Kingdom. Hence, the difference in party system might explain the null finding. Future

⁵ Our results replicate when we use a dependent variable that only relies on vote intention at time of the survey (Appendix C in the supporting information).

⁶ Appendix B (Table B4) shows the models including political interest, efficacy, and ideology separately.

⁷ The results do not change when we control for the strength of party support (Appendix D).

⁸ We do not find evidence for the suggestion that party activity conditions the effect of extroversion on party preference switches (Appendix E).

⁹ See Appendix F.

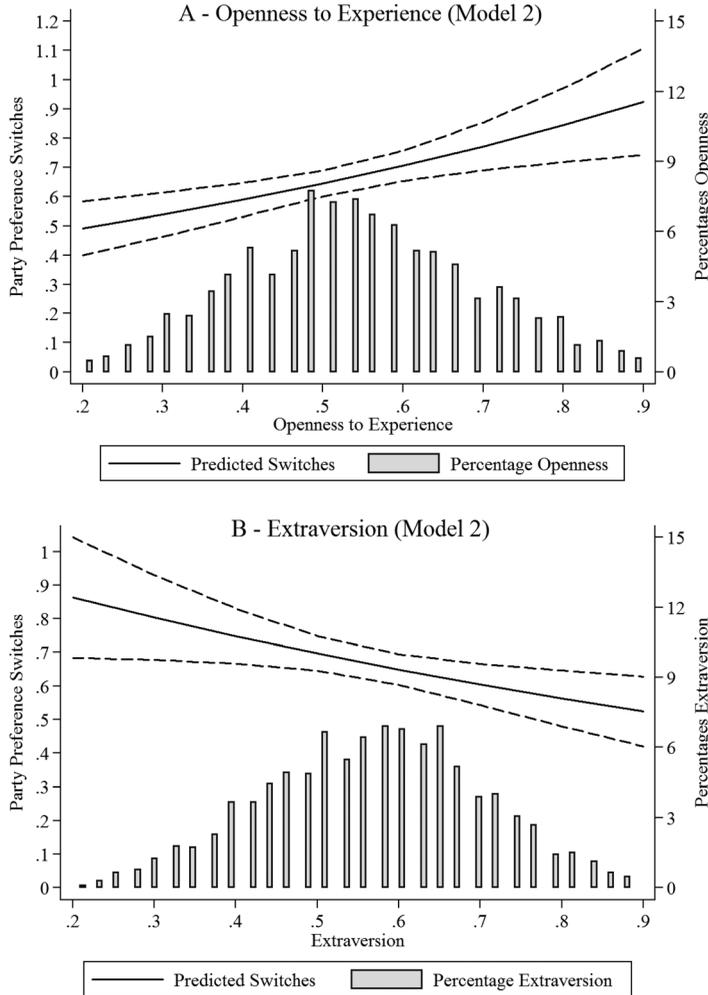


Figure 2. Predicted party preference switches (Denmark).

research using large personality inventories should address whether the null findings for extroversion are indeed the consequence of the measurement or driven by the political context.¹⁰

In the Danish and U.K. sample, age relates to loyalty. In the U.K. sample but not in the Danish sample, education and ideology are unrelated to switching votes. The educational difference might be because the U.K. 2.5 party system is less complex compared to the multiparty system in Denmark. The differences reported for political ideology could be related to the political context at the times of the survey or the operationalization of ideology.¹¹

Conclusion

Using two multiwave panel studies, this study demonstrates that people open to experience are more likely to switch vote. This result is robust across model specifications and political contexts and

¹⁰ We demonstrate that alternative specifications of the dependent variable yield similar results in the Danish and U.K. sample (SI G).

¹¹ SI H addresses the operationalization of ideology in greater detail.

confirms Hirschmann’s (1970) expectation that individuals vary in their inclination to stay loyal or to exit.

We also hypothesized that extroverts stay loyal and thus are less likely to switch. In the Danish sample, we confirm this hypothesis; however, in the U.K. sample, we fail to replicate it. We suggested this is due to poor measurement of personality traits in the U.K. study or to party-system differences. The former point reinforces Credé et al.’s (2012) critique that using abbreviated measures of personality traits reduces the reliability and validity of the question batteries.

We hypothesized that openness and extroversion directly impact vote switching. Yet, interest and efficacy suppress the association between openness and vote switching. Future research could address which other political motivational constructs mediate or suppress the association between openness and vote switching. Moreover, the political context could condition the extent to which individuals

Table 2. Negative Binomial Regression on Number of Party Preference Switches (United Kingdom)

	1	2
Openness	1.22 (0.20)	1.44* (0.25)
Extroversion	0.92 (0.17)	0.86 (0.16)
Conscientiousness	1.02 (0.16)	1.02 (0.16)
Agreeableness	1.01 (0.20)	1.01 (0.20)
Neuroticism	1.06 (0.15)	1.05 (0.15)
Age	0.31* (0.05)	0.37* (0.07)
Female	0.96 (0.06)	0.93 (0.06)
Education (Ref. = O-level)		
A-level	0.83* (0.07)	0.89 (0.07)
Vocational	0.88 (0.11)	0.92 (0.11)
Undergraduate	0.86 (0.08)	0.98 (0.10)
Master	0.83 (0.14)	0.97 (0.18)
Other	1.10 (0.09)	1.04 (0.09)
Household Income	0.55* (0.18)	0.63 (0.23)
Political Interest		0.56* (0.06)
External Efficacy		0.39* (0.06)
Political Ideology		1.21 (0.25)
Constant	0.79 (0.17)	1.13 (0.28)
N	3,795	3,584
Wald Chi ²	63.91	130.90
Log Pseudo-likelihood	-3,554.97	-3,316.88

Note. Incidence Ratios reported with standard errors clustered at the household level in parentheses.

* $p < 0.1$.

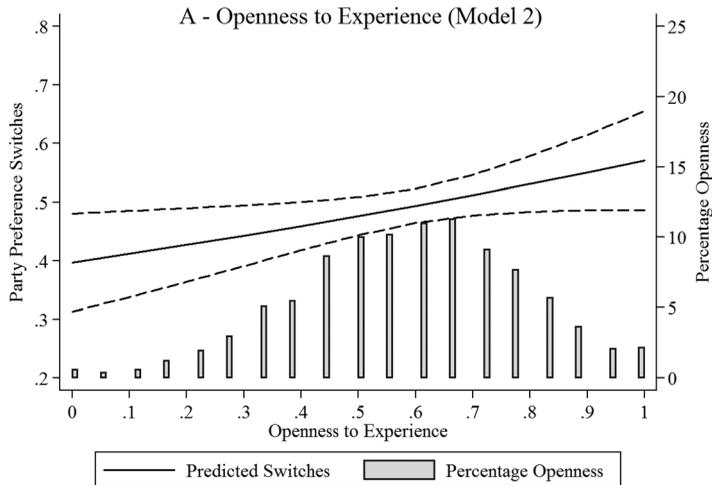


Figure 3. Predicted party preference switches (United Kingdom).

open to experience are likely to switch votes. For instance, the rise of a new party, such as the U.K. Independence Party in recent years, motivates individuals from one ideological inclination more than others.

To summarize, our study offers two contributions. First, we enrich the personality and politics literature as we theorize and confirm that openness to experience and extroversion predict vote switching. Second, we expand research on electoral volatility and show that the tendency to change party preference is, at least partly, rooted in deep-seated psychological dispositions.

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