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Response to Schimpf and Schoen's response to Bakker, Rooduijn and Schumacher (2016)¹

Bert N. Bakker², Matthijs Rooduijn³ and Gijs Schumacher³

In our article (henceforth: BRS) "*The psychological roots of populist voting: Evidence from the United States, the Netherlands and Germany*"⁴ we report a negative correlation between the personality trait Agreeableness and voting for populist parties in 3 countries. Recently, Schimpf and Schoen (2017) posted [a response](#) to this article on their university website. We were happy to read that Schimpf and Schoen continue the debate on the psychological roots of populism. In particular, they offer a specification of the theory we put forward by arguing that the relationship between Agreeableness and populism is indirect and mediated by political trust, and should also be modeled as such. Moreover, Schimpf and Schoen (SS) offer some additional critiques to BRS regarding the robustness of the findings and the operationalization of populist parties. In this note, we reply to these critiques. Most importantly we show that there is no consensus on whether personality should have direct or indirect effects; and provide some additional evidence of the robustness of the link between populism and Agreeableness.

1. *Agreeableness has an indirect effect on voting for populists via political trust*

The main claim of Schimpf and Schoen is that Agreeableness has an indirect effect on voting for populists. This is in contrast to our argument that it has a direct effect. The argument for an indirect effect, seems to be that there is consensus in the literature that personality should have an indirect effect (top of p.5 SS). We agree that some literature claims this: there is indeed a consensus that aspects of personality have an indirect effect on voting through ideology. But that does not exclude other aspects of personality to have a direct effect on voting. For example, the congruency principle by Caprara and co-authors from his team (Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Zimbardo, 1999; Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004; Chirumbolo &

¹ This is a non-peer-reviewed note in response to the non-peer-reviewed comment posted by Schimpf and Schoen on Research Gate.

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⁴ We want to thank Schimpf and Schoen for their constructive critique of our work which has helped us strengthen our argument. Besides, we want to thank them for keeping us up to date about the status of their reply.

Leone, 2010; Vecchione, Schoen, et al., 2011; Vecchione, Castro, & Caprara, 2011) assess the direct association between personality and vote choice. Likewise, Sibley and Osborne – a separate team of highly influential researchers – directly assess the association between personality and vote choice (Osborne & Sibley, 2012). Moreover, and as Mondak (2010) outlines in his book, the Big Five is just one model of personality and there are many other models of personality that have been shown to matter for vote choice. If we turn to these models, there is even more reason to question the assumed agreement about the claim that all effects of personality are mediated by attitudes. Only a few examples are the work on authoritarianism and voting behavior (Dunn, 2015), altruism and voting behavior (Zettler, Hilbig, & Haubrich, 2011), and risk taking and voting (Eckles, Kam, Maestas, & Schaffner, 2014; Kam & Simas, 2012). These studies signal that Schimpf and Schoen are incorrect to assert that there is a consensus that personality should have indirect effects on voting. Schimpf and Schoen's claim of contradictions in BRS is therefore also unfair. There is only a contradiction if we follow the assumption that there is a consensus about indirect effects of personality traits.

Nevertheless, the strength of Schimpf and Schoen is to ask for a specification of the mechanism. It also offers such a mechanism in terms of political trust as a mediator. The authors propose to explain the effect of Agreeableness on populist voting through trust in "politicians and parties" (p.12 of Schimpf and Schoen). We believe that this is problematic. Trust is an important sub facet of Agreeableness (Costa, McCrae, & Dye, 1991). Specifically, Costa and colleagues (1991, p. 888) explain that "trust can be defined as the tendency to attribute benevolent intent to others; distrust as the suspicion that others are dishonest or dangerous" and a low score on trust "is associated with cynicism" about others. Trust in politicians and parties could thus be conceived of as a concrete manifestation of a sub facet of Agreeableness. This renders Schimpf and Schoen's proposition, at least to some extent, tautological. After all, they explain the effect of trust through trust. Therefore, we do not think that it is theoretically meaningful to theorize that the effect of Agreeableness should be mediated by trust.

The authors subsequently use mediation analysis to analyze whether Agreeableness predicts populist voting via political trust. We find this part unconvincing because of the problems associated with mediation analyses, particularly of observational data. Recent

critiques in psychology (Bullock, Green, & Ha, 2010; Imai, Keele, & Tingley, 2010) and political science (Green, Ha, & Bullock, 2010; Imai, Keele, Tingley, & Yamamoto, 2011) illustrate that mediation analyses depart from assumptions which cannot be tested and/or are wrong. The authors acknowledge this (p.11). Hence, they call the results from the mediation analyses “only approximations”, because “estimating mediation effects is subject to strict identification rules that we simply cannot reconstruct based on the data at hand” (p.11). The term “approximation” is wrong here. The results of the mediation analyses are likely to be severely biased in unknown directions, as suggested by the literature that the authors cite. It is unconvincing to use these likely biased results as leverage against BRS.

To summarize, we believe that there are good theoretical and empirical reasons to doubt that the assumed mechanism by SS is theoretically meaningful and empirically identifiable.

2. Is the association between Agreeableness and voting for populist parties robust?

Schimpf and Schoen (2017) present various robustness checks in which they include weights for BRS’s analysis of German data (reported in Study 3). The authors introduce some weighting in the analysis due to oversampling issues (see footnote 6). We see no reason to use weights, unless one is interested in getting population-based estimates of a certain property, e.g. as in opinion polls. That is neither the goal of BRS nor of SS. So it is unclear what the goal of the analyses in Table 1 in Schimpf and Schoen is.

The additional analyses of Schimpf and Schoen in Germany, using a second dependent variable and a second dataset collected in 2013, suggest that the association between Agreeableness and voting for Die Linke is not always statistically significant – in 2013 – and the sign might sometimes flip - in 2009 - using a second dependent variable. These somewhat inconsistent findings might be due to the fact that the measure of Agreeableness used in BRS’ German study consists of only 1 item per trait – an issue Schimpf and Schoen also note on p.10. Recently, Bakker and Lelkes (2018) show that the use of brief personality traits affects the criterion validity of Big Five traits. To be more precise, Bakker and Lelkes show that brief measures underestimate the association between Big Five personality traits and political constructs – something that Gelman and Carlin (2014) call a Type M (magnitude) error. As such, Bakker and Lelkes urge scholars to be careful to conclude that there is no association between personality and a political construct when relying upon

highly abbreviated measures of personality.⁵ The conclusion by Schimpf and Schoen that BRS' "evidence does not support the notion that low levels of agreeableness make voters inclined to vote for the left-wing populist party" (p.9) is thus putting way too much emphasis on an inconsistent finding with an extremely brief measure of personality which is most likely due to impoverished measurement.

In a follow-up paper about the association between personality and populism (Bakker et al. 2017), we present associations between Agreeableness and support for populist parties and politicians with both a right-wing and a left-wing host ideology. In Spain we analyze the probability to vote for Podemos, a left-wing populist party (Ramiro & Gomez, 2017). In line with the findings from BRS in Germany, we find that low agreeable respondents are more likely to vote for Podemos compared to those high on Agreeableness. We also analyze the association between Agreeableness and a series of parties with a right-wing host ideology in the United States (Donald Trump), United Kingdom (U.K. Independence Party), the Netherlands (Freedom Party) and Switzerland (SVP) and – in a separate paper – support for the Danish People's Party (Bakker, Rooduijn, Schumacher, Klemmensen, & Nørgaard, 2018). In these nine population-based cross-sectional datasets, we rely upon measures of personality that range from one-item per trait to 12 items per trait. The association between Agreeableness and support for populist parties with different host ideologies turns out to be robust.

However, these observational studies might still not convince Schimpf and Schoen that there is a direct resonance between Agreeableness and support for populist parties. In our working paper, we also present the results from a conjoint experiment conducted in the United States (2017). The advantage of a conjoint experiment is that we can isolate the effect of the anti-establishment message from the host ideology of the politicians (which we also vary) (Hainmueller, Hopkins, & Yamamoto, 2014). In our conjoint-experiment, we show that the effect of the anti-establishment message on vote choice results in more votes for a politician if the respondent scores low on Agreeableness. Accordingly, the conjoint-

⁵ In some of their models, Schimpf and Schoen document an insignificant but positive association -- instead of a negative association -- between Agreeableness and support for Die Linke. Bakker and Lelkes (2018) show that the signs of the association between a brief personality measure and a political construct sometimes even flip – something that Gelman and Carlin (2014) call a Type S (sign) error. Most likely the positive – but insignificant association – is the consequence of using a very brief measure of personality.

experiment provides further evidence for our claim that the anti-establishment message resonates with low Agreeableness.

To summarize, we do not think that SS offer compelling theoretical or empirical evidence that question the association between Agreeableness and populist voting. Moreover, our ongoing work on this topic using both observational and experimental designs further supports the claim put forward by BRS.

3. How to define populist parties

Schimpf and Schoen discuss the inclusion and exclusion of populist parties in our study, in particular the Socialist Party (SP) in the Netherlands. We have not included the SP because no consensus exists if this party is (still) populist. Rooduijn and colleagues have shown (2014; Rooduijn, de Lange, & Van der Brug, 2014) that although the SP was strongly populist in the 1990s (when the campaign slogan was “vote against, vote SP”), the party has become much less populist over the years. In 2010 the party was only slightly more populist than most mainstream parties. So we see populism as a scale (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011). The SP by now scores very low on this, and other parties in the Netherlands (e.g. the Freedom Party) score very high on the populism scale. Therefore, it is questionable whether our theory still applies to the SP: their anti-establishment message has become too weak to be picked up by low agreeable voters. Because we find evidence of a negative association between Agreeableness and support for Die Linke (BRS) and Podemos (Bakker, Schumacher and Rooduijn 2017), we do believe that our theory also applies to left-wing populist parties.

Conclusion

We want to thank Schimpf and Schoen for their thoughtful and constructive comments to our article. They have helped us strengthen and fine-tune our argument. As we have shown in this response, the three arguments by Schimpf and Schoen do not lead us to reconsider our initial findings. That said, we do hope that this exchange leads to a further debate about the role of personality in politics. We therefore look forward to future work addressing the question how personality matters in politics and the support for populists in particular.

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