

Personality traits and political trust

Edmund Kelly*

October 26, 2026

Abstract

Many political attitudes tend to be stable in adulthood, and one explanation for this is that underlying personality traits cause people to develop different political views. However, an alternative view is that both personality traits and political attitudes reflect shared underlying formative experiences and inherited predispositions. Using twin and family data, I seek to explain why those who are higher in agreeableness and lower in neuroticism tend to be more politically trusting. Using co-twin and co-sibling models, I find that the associations between agreeableness, neuroticism, and political trust are substantially explained by family background. Subsequent tests using variance decomposition models suggest that both genes and environment play a role. I conclude that the associations between personality traits and political trust are explained by common underlying factors that cause them to develop jointly. This suggests that political attitudes may be formed earlier than some accounts assume.

Keywords: Personality; Big Five; trust; political trust; twin study; public opinion; political attitudes.

*Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Oxford, Manor Road, Oxford, OX1 3UQ, United Kingdom. Email: edmund.kelly@politics.ox.ac.uk.

Are political attitudes purely political? It is argued that they are not, and that underlying personality traits explain our political beliefs just as well as they explain our other patterns of behaviour (Mondak 2010; Gerber et al. 2011). In this view, our political ideologies and patterns of political behaviour are to a substantial extent caused by stable personality traits that are themselves formed in early life and are also reasonably heritable. This explanation suggests that our personality traits are formed first and then go on to influence our interactions with the world around us, including the political system.

However, an alternative view is that personality traits and political attitudes are closely connected dispositions, formed relatively early in life by common formative experiences and traits, which then mutually influence each other throughout our lives. There is some evidence for this view in panel data (Bakker et al. 2021a; Hatemi and Verhulst 2015), but it is difficult to account for the role of formative experiences or inherited traits with standard survey data (Ahlskog and Oskarsson 2023; Arceneaux et al. 2025). While some studies use methods from behavioral genetics to make similar claims (Verhulst et al. 2012; Dawes et al. 2014), they rely on strong assumptions that may not hold (Verhulst et al. 2019; Rasmussen et al. 2019; Charney and English 2013). In addition, previous work about personality traits and political views rarely considers attitudes beyond ideology (Arceneaux et al. 2025).

One important attitude that could be caused by our personality traits is our trust in politicians and political institutions. This is a key indicator of democratic health and it is associated with several important consequences, including electoral turnout and compliance with the law (Devine 2024). Recently, researchers have found that political trust tends to be quite stable in long run panel data (Devine and Valgarðsson 2024) and that it may have a modest inherited component (Kettlewell and Tymula 2024). One possible explanation for this is that political trust, as with many other attitudes, may be influenced by our stable underlying personality traits (Cawvey et al. 2018; Mondak et al. 2017).

This paper seeks to explain the relationship between personality traits and political trust. I first update a recent meta-analysis to confirm that both agreeableness (positively) and neuroticism (negatively) are associated with political trust (Bromme et al. 2022). I then analyse these relationships using data from twin and family studies in the United States. I use co-twin, co-sibling, and extended family decomposition models. These al-

low me to directly test how family background shapes the link between personality and trust and to decompose this into environmental and genetic factors. Importantly, they do this without relying on the strong assumptions inherent to standard behavioral genetics designs, for example, Direction of Causation models, or Cholesky decomposition models. Including non-twin siblings substantially increases power to detect the role of formative experiences as well as genetic explanations for the associations between personality and trust.

Using co-twin and co-sibling models, I show that the associations between political trust and both agreeableness and neuroticism are explained by family background. This in turn raises the question of whether this is primarily due to common genetic factors predicting personality traits and political trust or shared early life experiences affecting both political trust and personality traits. Using an extended family decomposition model, I find stronger evidence for inherited traits, although there is evidence that both play a role. This suggests that personality traits and political attitudes are likely to be closely connected traits linked to common formative experiences and inherited predispositions.

In what follows, I first outline why political trust may have a basis in personality traits, before arguing that the relationship between personality and political trust could be explained by pre-adult political socialization and inherited factors. I then review the data I use to disentangle this relationship, before demonstrating that the association between personality traits and political trust is explained by family background. I conclude by suggesting that political trust is likely formed earlier in life than previously thought.

Personality traits and political trust

Personality traits – relatively stable patterns of thoughts, feelings and actions which differentiate people from one another – are thought to affect many aspects of our lives, and our political attitudes are no exception. Personality has at various stages been argued to influence our ideological beliefs (Ahlskog 2023; Bakker 2017; Hatemi et al. 2014; Jost et al. 2008), our social attitudes (Hirsh et al. 2010; Fatke 2017; Caprara et al. 2006; Schoen and Schumann 2007), our patterns of political participation (Dynes et al. 2019; Hibbing et al. 2011; Blais and St-Vincent 2011), our feelings of political efficacy (Cawvey 2023; Vecchione and Caprara 2009), our attitudes toward democracy (Kim-Leffingwell 2023; Miklikowska

2012), and our susceptibility to populist messaging (Bakker et al. 2021b). More recently, it has been argued that personality traits may equally influence our trust in politicians and political institutions (Bromme et al. 2022; Cawvey et al. 2018; Mondak et al. 2017).

Often, political trust is thought to be a rational attitude, comprised of ongoing evaluations of the political system (Van der Meer and Hakhverdian 2017; Van Elsas 2015), and therefore personality traits are rarely included in analyses of political trust. The strong associations between political trust and economic performance (Van der Meer 2017a; Van der Meer 2017b), political incivility (Bøggild and Jensen 2024) and political scandals (Ares and Hernández 2017) are thought to support the idea that political trust is a rational response to events and policies. Summarizing the early literature, Levi and Stoker (2000, p. 481) state that: “whether citizens express trust or distrust is primarily a reflection of their political lives, not their personalities nor even their social characteristics”.

However, some recent literature has reconsidered or qualified this view of political trust. Recent work suggests that trust is a stable attitude in long-run panel data (Devine and Valgarðsson 2024). In addition, political trust shows less responsiveness to some events than previously thought (for example, Kelly and Tilley 2024). This appears inconsistent with a view in which people are expected to constantly update their political trust in response to events. It has therefore been argued that political trust may also have non-evaluative components related to early life socialization, or to disposition (Kelly et al. 2026; Kettlewell and Tymula 2024). One explanation for this is that political trust may be related to stable underlying personality traits. In this view, political trust is still influenced by events, but to a lesser extent. Some people are predisposed by their personality traits to be more trusting than others, and this tends to persist through changes in context.

We know that two of the Big Five personality traits are correlated with political trust¹. Previous cross-sectional studies have found that agreeableness and neuroticism are associated with political trust (Robertson 2024; Cawvey et al. 2018; Mondak et al. 2017;

¹I use the Big Five framework because it is consistently available across the datasets I use (Costa Jr et al. 2019; Goldberg 1992). Its five dimensions: agreeableness, neuroticism, extraversion, neuroticism and conscientiousness, show good cross-cultural replicability (McCrae et al. 1998) and re-test reliability (Gosling et al. 2003). My theoretical argument likely also applies to alternative conceptualisations of personality, such as the HEXACO or Big Six frameworks. Although these measures may show improved cross-cultural replicability (Ashton et al. 2014), they are unfortunately not available in my data. See Feher and Vernon (2021) for a review of alternatives to the Big Five conceptualisation of personality.

Freitag and Ackermann 2016). Summarising these studies, the meta-analysis conducted by Bromme et al. (2022) finds generally positive associations between agreeableness and political trust, and generally negative associations between neuroticism and political trust. By contrast, there are no significant relationships between political trust and conscientiousness, openness, or extraversion². It appears then that agreeableness and neuroticism may be important to understanding how people form political trust.

In addition, these correlations are plausible because there are both direct and indirect links between these personality traits and political trust. The direct links with political trust are clearest for agreeableness, which is related to people’s capacities for affection, generosity and compliance (John et al. 2008). Indeed, generalized interpersonal trust is sometimes considered a component of agreeableness (Weinschenk and Dawes 2019; Dinesen et al. 2022). Although this likely accounts for part of its connection with political trust, recent research suggests that the connection between political and social trust is due to political trust causing interpersonal trust, and not the other way around (Dinesen et al. 2022). This does not support an interpretation in which agreeableness and political trust are only connected due to interpersonal trust being a component of agreeableness.

Instead, it seems likely that there are several mechanisms collectively linking agreeableness with political trust. For example, those who are more agreeable are deferential to authority, and more likely to take statements by those authorities at face value (John et al. 1991). They are also more forgiving, which may moderate the negative effect of events such as political scandals or poor economic performance on their political trust (Strelan 2007). Those who are less agreeable also tend to be more susceptible to populist messaging designed to lower trust in established political institutions (Bakker and Lelkes 2018). We would therefore expect the more agreeable to also have higher levels of political trust.

²For the other three dimensions (openness, conscientiousness and extraversion), there is no consistent evidence about their relationship with political trust (Cawvey et al. 2018; Mondak et al. 2017). While some studies report a positive association between extraversion and political trust (Anderson 2010a; Hiraishi et al. 2008; Dinesen et al. 2014), the preponderance of studies do not find statistically significant relationships (Freitag and Bauer 2016; Dohmen et al. 2008; Mondak and Halperin 2008; Anderson 2010b) and this is confirmed by the meta-analysis from Bromme et al. (2022). There are also no consistent theoretical expectations. For example, while the more conscientious might feel a greater sense of duty toward their government, they are also less likely to grant political trust without substantial evidence (Dinesen et al. 2014).

There are also direct links between neuroticism and political trust. Neuroticism (or emotional stability) relates to levels of anxiety, irritability and hostility (John et al. 2008). Those who are more neurotic interpret events more negatively and experience generally lower affect (Rafienia et al. 2008; Costa and McCrae 1980). It seems likely that these biases would also apply when forming political trust judgements. As Cawvey et al. (2018) summarize: “individuals high in emotional stability perceive... institutions as partners for success, rather than as potential threats to their well-being”. We would therefore expect people high in neuroticism to form more negative political trust judgements for the same events and policies compared to those lower in neuroticism. In addition, those high in neuroticism are likely to more readily seek out negative information about politics which could further lower their political trust compared to those lower in neuroticism. Accordingly, people high in neuroticism tend not to trust others in their daily lives (Dinesen et al. 2014) and this seems to apply equally to their political trust (Bromme et al. 2022).

Beyond these direct mechanisms, commensurate personality traits predict health and socioeconomic outcomes in adulthood and these also predict political trust. Those higher in agreeableness and lower in neuroticism tend to be more financially successful and to remain in more robust health throughout their lives (Almlund et al. 2011; Roberts et al. 2007). Both of these benefits are likely to positively dispose them toward the political system, because those in poorer personal and financial health may blame state institutions for not remedying their concerns. As we would expect, therefore, both economic and health status are positively associated with political trust (see Van der Meer 2017b for economic outcomes and Mattila and Rapeli 2018 for health outcomes). The positive associations between agreeableness, neuroticism and political trust are therefore plausible because there are both direct and indirect links between these personality traits and political trust.

One interpretation of the association between personality and political trust is that personality traits are formed before political attitudes, and therefore cross-sectional associations between personality traits and political beliefs should be interpreted causally (Mondak 2010). Indeed, personality traits tend to stabilize early in life, and the correlations between personality traits in early and later life are high (Costa Jr et al. 2019). If one accepts that political trust is a rational attitude, which people constantly update, then it seems natural to assume that personality traits are causally prior to political trust. In

this view, political trust is formed after people’s underlying personality traits, as a result of the political events they experience after their formative years.

This viewpoint is grounded in the earlier personality psychology literature, in particular the Big Five Theory (Costa Jr and McCrae 1992). Proponents of this view argued that personality traits are “set like plaster” after our formative years (Costa and McCrae 1994). Therefore, they must causally influence our more malleable attributes, such as our political attitudes, which are formed later in life and informed by our foundational traits. Accordingly, this approach has been taken by some research on personality and political attitudes, especially in earlier studies (Mondak and Halperin 2008; Gerber et al. 2011), although other authors have been more cautious (Verhulst et al. 2012; Dawes et al. 2014). For several reasons, recent studies about personality and political attitudes have been less likely to adopt this causal viewpoint (Hatemi and Verhulst 2015; Boston et al. 2018).

One reason for this caution is that developments in the personality psychology literature have since undermined the assumed causal ordering between personality and other attributes. For example, there is now robust evidence that personality traits change over the life course, even after our formative years in adolescence and early adulthood (Bleidorn et al. 2022). Accordingly, recent models tend to take a nuanced view in which personality traits gain in stability during our formative years before they reach a plateau, after which they have both stable and malleable components (Bleidorn 2015; Bleidorn et al. 2021). This raises the possibility of a reciprocal relationship between personality and political attitudes, and, indeed, there is some evidence for this viewpoint (Bakker et al. 2021a). It also raises the possibility that personality traits and political attitudes might be separable concepts whose correlation is explained by unmeasured confounding variables.

Therefore, another reason for caution is that the relationship between personality traits and political attitudes could be explained by family background. This approach has been taken by many authors studying the associations between personality and other political attitudes (Bakker et al. 2021a; Hatemi and Verhulst 2015; Dawes et al. 2014; Verhulst et al. 2012). The background refers to early life conditions, for example the socioeconomic status of their early household environment, and to inherited traits, both of which may affect political trust (Kettlewell and Tymula 2024; Schoon and Cheng 2011). In this view,

any direct causal relationship between personality traits and political trust is weaker than the observed positive correlations might suggest, because it is confounded by the common background of those who become more politically trusting and develop commensurate personality traits. This is particularly important because these background variables are not measured in standard observational designs. This does not mean that personality is unimportant for understanding political trust. Instead, it means that rather than personality being an underlying trait that causes political trust, both would be closely connected dispositions reflecting our formative experiences and genes.

What might these background factors look like? The first group are inherited dispositional factors known to affect both personality traits and political trust. While personality traits show some variability in adulthood (Costa Jr et al. 2019), they tend to be stable after early life. It is therefore suggested that a substantial proportion of their variance is genetic in origin, with heritability estimates for personality traits typically being over 50 per cent (Bleidorn et al. 2022; Vukasović and Bratko 2015; Riemann et al. 1997)³. Equally, recent work suggests that political trust also has a genetic basis. Heritability estimates for political trust range from 30 to 50 per cent (Kelly et al. 2026; Kettlewell and Tymula 2024; Dawes et al. 2014). Most of the variation in political trust, as we would expect, is not attributable to genetic factors. However, there is nonetheless a modest heritable component to political trust, which tallies with similar findings for other political attitudes (Dawes et al. 2014; Sturgis et al. 2010). To the extent that the heritable components of personality traits and political trust overlap, this may explain their relationship.

The second set of relevant background factors are environmental factors experienced within the household in which we grew up, and during early adulthood. The role of the shared household environment on our political attitudes accrues primarily between the ages of 9 and 17, before tailing off by our early 20s as these attitudes crystalise (Hatemi et al. 2009). Similarly, recent evidence suggests that political trust is subject to repeated updating until around the age of 20, after which a stable dispositional model best fits the data (La Roi et al. 2025). This implies that adolescents and young adults update their political trust as environmental conditions develop during their formative years.

³A 50 per cent heritability estimate means that 50 per cent of the variation in each personality trait is statistically explained by heritable factors shared within twin pairs. This does not imply a Mendelian parent-to-child heritability as seen for certain heritable diseases such as cystic fibrosis.

These environmental factors may include the material conditions of the household, interactions with family, friends, and neighbours, early labour market experiences, and both secondary and tertiary education, among other experiences (Van Elsas 2015; Colombo et al. 2025, Marien 2017; Mayne and Hakhverdian 2017). One example is that political trust is strongly associated with early life household socioeconomic status. Those who grow up in higher income brackets tend to feel more comfortable with their lives in general, and with the political system. Accordingly, those in higher income brackets report higher political trust (Mayne and Hakhverdian 2017), as do those who report greater financial satisfaction (Catterberg and Moreno 2006), and, importantly, those who grew up in more financially comfortable households (Schoon et al. 2010; Schoon and Cheng 2011; Hooghe et al. 2015). Therefore, experiences in adolescence and early adulthood are likely to influence political trust in later life.

Similarly, the developmental psychology literature suggests that personality traits crystallise after a period of volatility in childhood and early adulthood, although it may take slightly longer for these traits to become fully set compared to our political attitudes (Roberts and DelVecchio 2000; Roberts et al. 2006; Srivastava et al. 2003; Roberts et al. 2005). Again, shared household experiences, such as household economic conditions and parental socialization, as well as the school environment and early labour market experiences, among other factors, all contribute to this crystallisation process. To the extent that these overlap with the contributors to stable political trust, they may confound that relationship.

For example, those whose early life is more comfortable tend to be more agreeable, and to have higher levels of emotional stability, in later life. Kitamura and Fujihara (2003) show that early relocations are associated with neuroticism in later life, and Kandler et al. (2012) show that negative early life events, such as prolonged illness or parental separation, predict neuroticism and lower agreeableness in later life⁴. Therefore, there is reasonable evidence that the relationship between personality traits and political trust may be partly

⁴One caveat is that these relationships could be confounded if a latent genetic trait shared by parents and their children predicts both personality traits and the probability of experiencing these negative events. For example, parents high in neuroticism and low in agreeableness may be more likely to separate, and because personality traits are substantially heritable, their children are likely to share these traits to some extent, but this does not necessarily mean that the separation caused the children to express these personality traits.

explained by common formative experiences. Early experiences may cause people to develop commensurate personality traits and orientations toward the political system.

While this sounds plausible, in fact we should expect more of the relationship to be genetic for several reasons. Heritability estimates for personality traits tend to be very high, with the meta-analysis from Vukasović and Bratko (2015) suggesting between 40 and 50 per cent heritability for most personality traits and 50 per cent typically being used as a benchmark (Jang et al. 1996). By contrast, estimated shared environmental variance tends to be low, which is most closely associated with early life conditions (Polderman et al. 2015; Jang et al. 1996). Similarly, while heritability estimates for political trust are lower, typically 30 to 40 per cent, shared environmental variance is low (Kettlewell and Tymula 2024; Dawes et al. 2014). It appears likely, therefore, that genes would be mostly responsible for any unmeasured confounding between personality and political trust.

In sum, I argued that the relationship between personality traits and political trust might be explained by common formative experiences and inherited traits causing people to jointly develop their personality profiles and their political attitudes⁵. This means that the observed correlations between personality traits and political trust could mislead us as to the nature of their relationship. Rather than personality being a latent underlying trait that causes people to develop political (dis)trust, both personality and political trust are formed relatively early in life and are informed by the same formative experiences and genetic predispositions. This would imply that there is a component of political trust that is also a disposition. This component would be formed relatively early in life, and it would develop jointly with other underlying dispositional traits, including our personalities.

In what follows, I combine evidence from twin and sibling data to estimate the extent to which the relationship between personality traits and political trust is explained by family background, and to estimate which of these factors are most influential.

⁵There is some suggestive evidence that this may also explain the associations between some personality traits, ideology, and political behaviour. For example, Ahlskog (2023) shows that when accounting for family background, the relationship between extraversion and political participation is eliminated, while Dawes et al. (2014) and Verhulst et al. (2012) come to the same conclusion about all Big Five dimensions. Similarly, (Weinschenk and Dawes 2017; Weinschenk and Dawes 2018) show that the relationships between personality traits, political interest, and one's sense of civic duty are not robust to accounting for family background. Kandler et al. (2012) also show that genetic factors account for most of the correlation between personality traits and political ideology.

Hypotheses

My hypotheses follow straightforwardly from the preceding discussion. I first hypothesize that some of the Big Five personality traits are correlated with political trust.

H1 There are associations between the Big Five personality traits and political trust.

H1a. Agreeableness is positively associated with political trust.

H1b. Neuroticism is negatively associated with political trust.

When accounting for family background (early life conditions and heritable dispositions), I argued that the relationship between personality traits and political trust will be weaker. This means that the associations in Hypothesis 1 may not be causal in origin. I therefore hypothesize that:

H2 The associations between the Big Five personality traits and political trust are not causal in origin.

This explanation has two possible sources: early life conditions such as socioeconomic status, and inherited genetic factors which predict both personality traits and political trust. The remaining two hypotheses account for these two possible sets of explanations, with the first suggesting that the explanations are genetic in origin.

H3 The associations between the Big Five personality traits and political trust are explained by inherited dispositional factors.

H3a. The association between agreeableness and political trust is explained by inherited dispositional factors.

H3b. The association between neuroticism and political trust is explained by inherited dispositional factors.

The final hypothesis then refers to the possibility that the explanation is instead due to early life socialization.

H4 The associations between the Big Five personality traits and political trust are explained by shared early life conditions.

H4a. The association between agreeableness and political trust is explained by shared early life conditions.

H4b. The association between neuroticism and political trust is explained by shared early life conditions.

Data and method

I first test whether associations exist between personality and trust (Hypothesis 1), before testing whether these associations are explained by background factors (Hypothesis 2). Finally, I then try to identify whether formative experiences or inherited genetic factors are more influential in explaining these relationships (Hypotheses 3-4).

Meta-analysis

The first step is to establish whether the Big Five personality traits are associated with political trust. For this purpose, I updated the meta-analysis conducted by Bromme et al. (2022). The authors of that study collected studies measuring at least one of the Big Five personality traits and measuring trust in politicians or national political institutions⁶. I expanded their dataset from 16 studies to 23 studies.

Bromme et al. (2022) forward searched articles citing Mondak and Halperin (2008) and Mondak (2010). I expanded their dataset with a systematic Web of Science search⁷. Following Bromme et al. (2022), I included studies which report a correlation or a regression coefficient between at least one of the Big Five personality traits and at least one measure of political trust⁸. However, I also included studies published after 2020, which was the last year in the original data. This added four studies. I also included studies which used the same data source, for which I compensated by including a random effect for the data source in the models. This added three more studies. The final dataset has 23 studies and 123 coefficients, covering all the Big Five dimensions (see Appendix A for the full list).

⁶Bromme et al. (2022) also included a study which measured trust in the European Union. I excluded this study because trust in European institutions is likely to be confounded with Euroscepticism and does not tend to be strongly correlated with trust in national or local institutions (Muñoz 2017).

⁷I used the keyword: ("political trust" OR "trust in politics" OR "political distrust") AND ("personality" or "extraversion" or "conscientiousness" or "neuroticism" or "agreeableness" or "big five" or "big 5").

⁸Specifically, trust in politicians or political institutions, at the local or national levels.

Following Devine (2024), I estimated partial correlations for each coefficient. For studies in which the underlying coefficient is from a linear regression, I first followed Aloe and Thompson (2013) and converted these into a partial correlation with the formula:

$$r = \frac{t}{\sqrt{t^2 + (n - p - 1)}}$$

In which r is the partial correlation, t is the test statistic from the linear regression, n is the sample size, and p is the number of parameters in the linear regression model. In a few cases, the regression models included control variables, and, therefore, their substantive interpretation is slightly different than for bivariate regression or correlation coefficients. I retain them in the main analysis to reduce possible bias from their exclusion. Nonetheless, in the Appendix, I show that the results are similar when excluding these coefficients. I then standardised all partial correlations using the transformation:

$$s = \frac{1}{2} \ln \frac{(1+r)}{(1-r)}$$

In which r is the unstandardized partial correlation and s is the standardized partial correlation. This ensures that all partial correlations are numerically comparable. I then ran a hierarchical model for each of the Big Five traits, with random intercepts for the study, for the political trust measure type, the personality measure type, and for the dataset. The intercept from these models is the standardized meta-analytical coefficient, and it can be interpreted as the standardized effect of a one standard deviation change in the personality trait of interest on political trust. See Appendix A for full technical details including notes on how different types of correlation coefficients were standardised (again following Devine 2024).

Co-twin and co-sibling models

The next step is to establish whether the associations between the Big Five dimensions and political trust are explained by family background. For this purpose, I use twin and sibling data, which has the key advantage that the twins and siblings are known to be genetically very similar, and to have grown up in the same early life environment⁹. This allows me to estimate the relationship between personality traits and political trust while

⁹For the vast majority of positions across the genome, humans are genetically identical. The remaining positions account for all genetic variation between humans, of which DZ twins and other full siblings share 50 per cent.

controlling for these background factors, which are usually not measured. It also does so without relying on the strong assumptions necessitated by many behavioural genetics designs (Verhulst et al. 2019; Rasmussen et al. 2019; Charney and English 2013).

I selected twin and sibling datasets by referring to the list of twin studies in Hur et al. (2019), and then identifying surveys fielded within these twin datasets which measured both political trust, and the Big Five personality traits. I excluded some datasets due to insufficient sample sizes¹⁰. I excluded others that measured personality traits because they did not measure political trust¹¹, and vice-versa I excluded those which measured political trust but not personality traits¹². I also excluded some other datasets due to using measures of personality incompatible with the Big Five¹³. I identified three suitable datasets, two of which are publicly accessible and I therefore analyse here¹⁴.

The included datasets are the Minnesota Twins Political Survey/MTPS (Hatemi et al. 2016), and the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health/NLSAH (Harris et al. 2013). I summarize these datasets in Table 1. The Minnesotan data includes monozygotic (MZ) twins and dizygotic (DZ) twins, while the Add. Health data also includes data on non-twin full and half siblings. In total, there are 1349 observations in the Minnesotan data and 3062 observations in the Add. Health data. The analysis samples are restricted to pairs of twins and siblings for whom I have information on all relevant variables for both siblings. Pooling MZ and DZ twins (and siblings where available) substantially improves my sample size and statistical power compared to using MZ twins alone.

Table 1: Summary of data

Name	Country	Survey fieldwork	N	MZ	DZ	Non-twin siblings	Age range
Minnesota Twins Political Survey (MTPS)	USA	2008-2009	1349	791	558	0	53-62
National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (NLSAH)	USA	2009	3066	390	574	2102	18-26

In the Minnesotan data, I measure political trust using questions from the standard American National Election Study battery, which asks about trust in government and in politicians. To reduce measurement error, I collate these items into a scale which I stan-

¹⁰The 1958 and 1970 UK cohort studies.

¹¹The VA30K dataset, and the Australian Twin Registry.

¹²The Australian Twins Economic Preferences Survey.

¹³The Swedish Twin Registry.

¹⁴The Danish Political Twins Study is not public. The assumption that my results hold outside the United States would warrant replication.

standardized in terms of standard deviation changes. The scale shows reasonable reliability as indicated by Cronbach’s Alpha ($\alpha = 0.68$). With the Add. Health data, I similarly created a scale from the three political trust questions, which cover trust in the federal, state and local governments. Again, this scale shows good reliability with an Alpha of 0.96¹⁵.

The Minnesotan data includes a small number of twins raised apart for at least some of their childhood (160 of the 1349 total sample). 116 of these twins were separated at age 16 or 17 and therefore still shared the majority of their childhood experiences. Nonetheless, I exclude these twins from the Minnesotan analyses to provide the cleanest possible test of the influence of early environments on the relationship between personality and trust. The Adolescent Health data I use does not include twins or siblings raised apart.

Table 2: Measures of political trust in the twin and family data

Dataset	Political trust
MTPS	Two-item battery for trust in politicians and government. $\alpha = 0.68$. 1. How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right? (Options: “just about always”, “most of the time”, “only some of the time”). 2. Do you think that quite a few of the people running the government are crooked, not very many are, or do you think that hardly any of them are crooked? (Options: “Quite a few are crooked”, “Not very many are crooked”, “Hardly any are crooked”).
NLSAH	Three-item battery for trust in local, state and federal government. $\alpha = 0.96$. How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements? (Likert scale). 1. I trust the federal government. 2. I trust my state government. 3. I trust my local government

In the Minnesotan data, I measure the Big Five dimensions using the 44-item Big Five Inventory (John et al. 1991), and in the Add. Health data, I use the 20-item Mini-IPIP (Donnellan et al. 2006). These data again show reasonable reliability, particularly the 44-item scale¹⁶, and I present factor analyses for all ten personality scales in Appendix B. These longer scales are generally more reliable than shorter personality batteries, including when measuring the associations between personality traits and political attitudes (Boston et al. 2018; Bakker and Leles 2018; Rammstedt et al. 2013). See Appendix B for

¹⁵I standardized the trust and personality measures by subtracting their mean and dividing by their standard deviation.

¹⁶Although the shorter mini-IPIP scale generally shows lower reliability, this was still above acceptable minimums (Cronbach’s Alpha > 0.5). This reflects previous psychological studies of the Add. Health mini-IPIP measures (Baldasaro et al. 2013).

full descriptive statistics including the list of questions in each personality scale.

I test the relationships between the Big Five personality traits and political trust using co-twin and co-sibling models. These designs use the observation that twins and siblings are genetically similar and share the same family environment due to their common upbringing. By testing differences within pairs of twins and siblings – comparing how differences in each personality trait relate to differences in political trust – I can estimate the relationship between the Big Five personality traits and political trust while controlling for family-related background variables. In effect, this approach treats one sibling as a credible (albeit imperfect) counterfactual for the other and asks whether the twin with higher political trust is also higher (or lower) on the relevant personality trait.

In practical terms, this involves comparing two models. The first is a naïve model in which I regress the personality trait on political trust while controlling for only birth year fixed effects, sex, and an interaction between the two. The second replaces these controls with sibling pair fixed effects, focusing solely on within-pair variation isolated from factors related to family background. If the relationship between personality and political trust is explained by these factors, then the coefficient for political trust will decrease in those models (Ahlskog and Oskarsson 2023).

Although using a within-family approach provides substantial leverage against background confounding, as with all methods, it has its limitations. One important limitation is that statistical power is lower than in standard designs because siblings are related. To my knowledge, there is no standard approach for calculating power in twin and sibling fixed effects designs. Nonetheless, following the approach taken by Feng (2025) I conducted sensitivity power calculations using the intra-class correlation coefficients for political trust. These suggested that both datasets have reasonable power to detect small personality effects ($\beta = 0.08$ for the Minnesotan data, or $\beta = 0.05$ for the Add. Health data). That said, it is important to note that even if I do not estimate significant effects of personality on political trust, I cannot rule out very small effects below these thresholds.

Extended family variance decomposition models

If the relationship between personality traits and political trust is attenuated when including family fixed effects in the co-twin and co-sibling models, this suggests that the relationship is explained by background factors. However, this could be due to shared early life conditions, inherited dispositional factors, or both. The family fixed effects are latent variables which capture all (measured and unmeasured) factors shared within families, and they are by design agnostic about the exact combination of these factors. The co-twin and co-sibling design therefore provides maximum leverage against background confounding, but does not directly inform us about the source of that confounding.

To test the relative importance of each group of factors, I use an extended family variance decomposition model. This uses data on MZ twins, DZ twins, and full siblings to decompose the covariation between two or more traits into additive genetic (A), shared environmental (C) and unique environmental (E) components (Medland and Hatemi 2009; Neale and Cardon 2013). It allows me to estimate the covariation between two traits that can be attributed to genetic and environmental factors and thereby to estimate the source of any confounding between personality traits and political trust. Specifically, I estimate the proportion of the total (phenotypic) correlation that is attributable to additive genetic factors, to common environmental factors, and to unique environmental factors.

Socialised influences on the relationship between personality traits and political trust are divided between the C component and the E component. Shared environmental factors (C) are those typically experienced by twins living under the same roof, for example, shared families and schools. Unique environmental factors (E) are those that affect the twins differently, including early experiences not shared by the twins. For example, to the extent that childhood friendship groups differed between twins, these would be captured by the E component rather than the C component. Genetic influences are only contained in the A component.

A standard bivariate twin model uses the correlations between the traits of interest within the MZ and DZ twin pairs. If the correlation within MZ twin pairs is less than perfect, the difference is attributed to non-shared environmental factors (E) that make siblings within twin pairs different from each other (for example, external influences, random genetic mutations, or measurement error). The difference between the within-MZ

correlation and the within-DZ correlation is attributed to genetic factors (A) and to the shared environment (C). The extent to which the MZ correlation exceeds that within DZ pairs reflects the weighting toward the A component rather than the C component.

I use an extended family model that includes non-twin full siblings in addition to MZ and DZ twins. Non-twin full siblings share 50 per cent of their genes and grow up in similar environments to one another, and can therefore be treated as de-facto DZ twins in an ACE decomposition (Ojeda 2016). The resulting larger sample of non-MZ pairs increases the statistical power to disentangle genetic from (common) environmental covariation between personality traits and political trust (Hatemi et al. 2010)¹⁷. This allows me to partially account for assumptions which might overestimate the genetic component of the relationship, although I cannot account for those that might underestimate it¹⁸.

In sum, including full siblings as well as MZ and DZ twins increases the power to differentiate genetic from environmental covariation between personality traits and political trust (Keller et al. 2010). Given this and the substantially larger sample size than the Minnesotan data, I use the Add. Health data to run these models. Given the stronger assumptions, these estimates should be treated with more caution than the co-twin and co-sibling estimates. Nonetheless, they estimate the proportion of the associations between personality and trust that is attributed to genetic or environmental factors.

Analysis

Meta-analysis

The first step is to test Hypothesis 1 - whether the Big Five personality traits are associated with political trust. Table 3 summarizes the standardized partial correlations between the Big Five dimensions and political trust from the updated meta-analysis.

¹⁷This is maximised when there are approximately four times as many DZ twins/siblings as MZ twins (Posthuma and Boomsma 2000). In this case, there are around twice as many full siblings and DZ pairs as there are MZ pairs.

¹⁸See Appendix B for a further discussion of these assumptions.

Table 3: Standardized meta-analytical associations between the Big Five personality traits on political trust.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Big Five Dimension	Agreeableness	Neuroticism	Conscientiousness	Extraversion	Openness
Standardized partial correlation	0.090*	-0.058*	0.003	0.026	0.027
	(0.019)	(0.019)	(0.029)	(0.020)	(0.024)
Prop. positive	88%	13%	64%	61%	57%
Num. obs.	24	22	22	22	22
Num. studies	23	22	22	22	21

Note. $*p < 0.05$. Standardized partial correlations (Fisher’s Z) and their standard errors shown. The dataset is an updated version of Bromme et al. (2022), and it includes 123 coefficients from 23 studies. All models include random effects for the data source, for the study, for the political trust measure type, and for the personality trait measure type.

Agreeableness and neuroticism are clearly associated with political trust. For agreeableness, 86% of studies report a positive coefficient. The standardized partial correlation is also positive and statistically significant at the 5 per cent level. For neuroticism, 85% of the included studies report a negative coefficient, and the standardized coefficient is negative and statistically significant. Therefore, it appears that there are robust associations between agreeableness and neuroticism, and political trust.

To put these results into context, general guidelines for meta-analyses in the social sciences suggest that they are moderate (Doucouliagos 2011¹⁹). However, context-specific benchmarks demonstrate that they are comparable to other political consequences of personality traits, outcomes of political trust, and classic meta-analytical results in political science. For example, the estimated effect of agreeableness is larger than its estimated effects on political efficacy and participation (Fisher’s $Z < 0.05$, Bromme et al. 2022), comparable to the effect of political trust on environmental and immigration policy preferences (Fisher’s $Z = 0.09$, Devine 2024), and equal to the rally effect of terror attacks (Fisher’s $Z = 0.09$, Godefroidt 2023). By contrast, the meta-analytical effect of neuroticism is comparable to its estimated effects on political interest and political participation (Fisher’s $Z = 0.08$ and 0.03 , Bromme et al. 2022), similar to the estimated effects of political trust on voter turnout and redistribution preferences (Fisher’s $Z = 0.06$, Devine 2024), and larger than the effect of ethnic diversity on interpersonal trust (Fisher’s $Z = -0.025$, Dinesen et al. 2020).

¹⁹Partial correlations cannot be interpreted analogously to zero order correlations. Doucouliagos (2011) argues that for meta-analyses in economics, a partial correlation above 0.07 should be interpreted as moderate, and a partial correlation over 0.33 should be interpreted as large.

By contrast, and as expected, it does not appear that the other three Big Five dimensions (conscientiousness, extraversion and openness) are associated with political trust. While all three associations are positive, they are generally small and statistically insignificant. Almost half of the studies reported a negative coefficient, and the coefficients varied substantially, indicating that there is no robust effect on political trust. I therefore find support for Hypothesis 1 (and specifically, for Hypotheses 1a and 1b); there are associations between two of the Big Five personality traits and political trust.

Co-twin and co-sibling results

The next step is to test whether the associations between the Big Five personality traits and political trust are explained by family background. Table 4 reports the results from a co-twin control design between the Big Five personality traits and political trust using the Minnesotan data. The naïve models are reported first (with only age, sex and their interaction as controls) followed by the twin pair fixed effects models for each trait.

There are statistically significant naïve estimates for both agreeableness and neuroticism, supporting Hypothesis 1. These effects are modest in size, with a one standard deviation increase in each personality trait being associated with around a 0.1 standard deviation changes in political trust. By contrast, the effects for the other three personality traits are small and statistically insignificant. Hypotheses 1a and 1b are therefore supported; agreeableness and neuroticism are significantly associated with political trust.

Table 4: Co-twin models for the Big Five personality traits and political trust, United States (Minnesota Twins Political Survey).

Dependent variable	Political trust scale									
	Agreeableness		Neuroticism		Extraversion		Conscientiousness		Openness	
Personality trait	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
–	0.143*	0.045	–0.065*	–0.011	–0.036	0.004	–0.009	–0.051	–0.056	–0.044
	(0.029)	(0.032)	(0.030)	(0.035)	(0.029)	(0.042)	(0.029)	(0.035)	(0.031)	(0.038)
Twin pair FE	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Observations	1146	1146	1148	1148	1154	1154	1148	1148	1151	1151
Adjusted R^2	0.018	0.225	0.002	0.216	0.000	0.226	0.000	0.214	0.001	0.231
T(FE $\neq$ OLS)	–	2.42	–	1.27	–	0.77	–	0.80	–	0.26

Note. *p<0.05. Standardized effect sizes and their standard errors shown. The data is from the Minnesota

Twins Political Survey. The naïve models include controls for age, sex, and an interaction term between age and sex. The fixed effects models include fixed effects for each twin pair. See Appendix B for DZ twin results.

However, neither of these associations are robust to controlling for family background by including twin pair fixed effects in the models. In both cases, the association drops substantially and loses statistical significance. Nonetheless, while the evidence is clear for agreeableness, it is less cut and dry for neuroticism. Applying the Paternoster et al. (1998) test for the statistical equality of regression coefficients suggests that the difference is statistically significant for agreeableness, but that we cannot rule out the null of no confounding for neuroticism. It appears, therefore, that there is mixed evidence for Hypothesis 2 from the Minnesotan twin data. With these data, I find support for Hypothesis 2a, that the association between agreeableness and political trust is confounded with family background, but not for Hypothesis 2b, that the association between neuroticism and political trust is similarly confounded.

One drawback with using data on twins alone is the reduced sample size this generally entails. In the subsequent analyses I therefore use extended family data to significantly boost my sample size. In Table 5 I report the co-sibling study using the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. Again, for each of the Big Five dimensions I report a naïve model, and then a model with fixed effects. In this case, the fixed effects are for families rather than twin pairs, and the data includes both twins and non-twin (full and half) siblings. All respondents shared their early life upbringing and also share a large proportion of their genes.

Table 5: Co-sibling models for the Big Five personality traits and political trust, United States (National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health).

Dependent variable	Political trust scale									
Personality trait	Agreeableness		Neuroticism		Extraversion		Conscientiousness		Openness	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
–	0.081*	0.004	–0.108*	–0.047	0.023	0.023	0.039*	0.001	–0.009	–0.046
	(0.019)	(0.028)	(0.019)	(0.025)	(0.018)	(0.025)	(0.018)	(0.024)	(0.018)	(0.027)
Twin pair FE	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y
Observations	3062	3062	3062	3062	3066	3066	3065	3065	3070	3070
Adjusted R^2	0.016	0.213	0.005	0.203	0.001	0.213	0.000	0.202	0.002	0.217
T(FE $\neq$ OLS)	–	2.45	–	1.96	–	0.00	–	1.27	–	1.14

Note. * $p < 0.05$. Standardized effect sizes and their standard errors shown. The data is from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. The naïve models include controls for sex. The fixed effects

models include fixed effects for each twin pair. See Appendix B for DZ twin results.

The results are similar to the twin study in this extended sample. Again, there are statistically significant naïve estimates for both agreeableness and neuroticism, in the expected directions, supporting Hypotheses 1a and 1b. And again, neither of these estimates is robust to the inclusion of family fixed effects. In the case of agreeableness, the effect falls almost exactly to zero, and in the case of neuroticism it more than halves. As before, the effects of extraversion and openness are both small and statistically insignificant in both types of specification. However, in the extended sample, the evidence that family background matters is clearer in both cases. Applying the Paternoster et al. (1998) test for the equality of regression coefficients suggests that both of these differences are statistically significant. I therefore find evidence in favour of both Hypothesis 2a and Hypothesis 2b with these data; the associations between political trust and both agreeableness and neuroticism appear to be explained by family background²⁰.

The results across the two datasets are robust in several ways, and I report robustness tests in Appendix B. First, bivariate twin decomposition models also suggest that there is no causal relationship, because the e_{12} path coefficient (which represents the unconfounded shared variance between personality and political trust), is essentially zero and statistically insignificant in both cases. I also present robustness checks for: measurement error corrections, outlier corrections, and demonstrating sufficient within-twin variance for a co-twin analysis. In addition, the preceding meta-analysis indicates that the pattern of associations between the Big Five traits and political trust is similar in general population studies, alleviating the concern that these associations might be specific to family samples. In sum, the co-twin and co-sibling results generally support Hypothesis 2; the associations between personality traits and political trust should not be interpreted causally.

One particular concern might be that the confounding between agreeableness and political trust may be explained by trust being a component of agreeableness which cannot be meaningfully measured separately. Generalized interpersonal trust is sometimes

²⁰One small difference from the preceding co-twin analyses is that there is a small, statistically significant effect of conscientiousness in the naïve model. While this effect falls almost exactly to zero and loses statistical significance in the fixed effects model, the Paternoster et al. (1998) test suggests that we cannot reject the null hypothesis of no confounding. However, this effect is very small, suggesting that if there is an effect of conscientiousness on political trust, it is unlikely to be substantively important, and it would not be possible to definitely show that this small effect is confounded without a very large sample size.

considered part of agreeableness and is in turn strongly associated with political trust (Sønderskov and Dinesen 2016). The attenuation in the co-twin models might then reflect trust and agreeableness being conceptually inseparable, rather than confounding due to family background. However, this seems unlikely. For one thing, the most recent research suggests that the correlation between political and interpersonal trust is explained by political trust causing interpersonal trust and not the other way around (Dinesen et al. 2022). For another, in Appendix B, I replicate the MTPS analyses while excluding the NEO agreeableness item recording whether respondents are ‘generally trusting’. The similarity between these results and the main MTPS estimates suggests that generalised trust does not drive the association between agreeableness and political trust.

Extended family variance decomposition models

My results thus far suggest that the relationship between personality traits and political trust is explained by family background. However, they do not provide direct evidence as to whether this explanation is primarily due to shared heritable dispositions or shared early life factors. Using data from the bivariate decomposition model for the Add. Health data, Table 6 shows the proportion of the correlations between political trust, agreeableness and neuroticism that can be attributed to shared heritable dispositions (%Rg) and to the shared early life environment in which the twins were raised (%Rc). For completeness, I also report %Re, which does not provide further information about family background but indicates the covariation between trust and personality traits attributable to factors other than the common heritable predispositions and early life environment shared by the twins (and therefore the covariation that was used to estimate the relationship between the personality traits and political trust in the fixed effects models).

Table 6: The proportional genetic (%Rg), common environmental (%Rc) and unique environmental (%Re) correlations between personality traits and political trust, United States (National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health).

Dataset	Dependent variable	%Rg	%Rc	%Re
Add. Health	Agreeableness	71.1	19.1	09.7
		[63.6; 78.7]	[05.6, 32.6]	[02.8; 16.7]
	Neuroticism	71.6	16.5	11.8
		[52.7; 90.5]	[05.9, 27.3]	[02.5; 21.1]

Note. The data is on MZ and DZ twins from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. Point estimates and bootstrapped 95 per cent confidence intervals are shown, derived from a bivariate direct decomposition model (Verhulst et al. 2019). The models control for age and sex. All estimates have been rounded to one decimal place. All models were run with the package ‘umx’ in R.

While there is substantial variability in the results for both genetic and environmental components, environmental factors appear to play a lesser role in the association between personality traits and political trust. For both agreeableness and neuroticism, about 70 per cent of the correlation is attributable to shared heritable factors. Similarly, in both cases, around 20 per cent of the correlation is attributable to common environmental factors, and around 10 per cent to unique environmental factors. The estimated environmental contribution to the association between personality and trust (around 30 per cent in total) approximates that to the association between personality and political participation (Dawes et al. 2014; Weinschenk et al. 2023). By contrast, for other political attitudes, such as political interest (Weinschenk and Dawes 2017) and the sense of civic duty (Weinschenk and Dawes 2018), the estimated environmental contributions are lower, between 10 and 20 per cent. This suggests that there is a higher environmental contribution to relationship between personality and political trust than for political attitudes (and one that is similar to the relationship between personality and political behaviour).

As previously mentioned, these estimates should be treated with a higher degree of caution than the co-sibling results. Although these issues are mitigated in an extended family design, the parameter estimates and their confidence intervals are still sensitive to the underlying assumptions of a bivariate decomposition model, and in particular the proportional genetic correlation may be somewhat over-estimated. Nonetheless, it appears that the relationship between personality traits and political trust is likely to be explained by both shared heritable traits and by shared environmental factors, but the evidence is somewhat stronger for shared heritable factors. I therefore find qualified support for both Hypotheses 3 and 4, but the evidence is slightly stronger for Hypothesis 3.

Conclusion

Maintaining trust in political institutions is crucial for democratic politics. Without reasonable levels of political trust, we might expect people to stop participating in political life, to reduce their compliance with the law, or to lose respect for core democratic princi-

ples (Devine 2024; Catterberg and Moreno 2006). However, the origins of political trust are less clear. As with many other political attitudes, political trust tends to be quite stable in adulthood. Therefore, some have argued that trust is a socialized attitude formed in early life which is then quite stable. Recent work has built on this suggestion and argued that political trust may be closely related to underlying personality traits.

The evidence presented in this paper suggests personality and political trust are indeed closely connected. There are robust associations between agreeableness (positive) and neuroticism (negative) and political trust, as confirmed by the meta-analysis and in the family data. In addition, this closeness is mostly explained by common formative experiences and inherited traits. When accounting for family background in a twin- and sibling-pair fixed effects design, the associations between agreeableness, neuroticism, and political trust fell substantially and lost statistical significance. In sum, therefore, the evidence presented here suggests that both personality traits and political trust are dispositions formed in early life, influenced by common formative experiences and inherited traits.

As always, of course, there are caveats to these findings. For one thing, it is difficult to precisely differentiate between formative experiences and inherited traits. Parents share heritable predispositions with their children. These dispositions influence the environments parents create for their children, including aspects that are likely to be important for political trust (for example, whether and how parents talk about politics with their children). Therefore, while the decomposition models suggest that the relationship between personality and trust is more explained by inherited traits than formative experiences, these results should not be interpreted as meaning that formative experiences are unimportant.

For another thing, the family data I use is from the United States. While the data vary in the ages and cohorts studied, they do not vary across countries. To my knowledge, there is no evidence that the heritability of political trust or personality traits differs markedly across national contexts, or that the relationships between political trust and personality traits vary systematically across countries (Mondak et al. 2017; Kettlewell and Tymula 2024; Dawes et al. 2014). Therefore, I would not expect my findings to be notably different in other national contexts. Nonetheless, I cannot rule that out with these data.

All things considered, my findings have implications for our understanding of the origins of political trust and political attitudes more generally. They help to explain why political trust is stable in long-run panel data and they provide further detail about the early life origins of political trust. This further implies that political trust is likely formed earlier in life than traditional evaluative accounts would suggest (Devine and Valgarðsson 2024). Trust being formed early also has policy implications. To the extent that political trust is a stable attitude formed in early life, it may be more difficult for policy interventions to alleviate the low and declining political trust observed in many democracies today.

More broadly, this research contributes to the debate about the nature of the relationships between personality and political attitudes (Verhulst et al. 2012; Dawes et al. 2014). While personality traits are strongly associated with many political attitudes, it is increasingly apparent that a model in which personality traits are formed early in life and are causally prior to political attitudes is not supported by the data. Instead, both personality traits and some political attitudes are likely to be dispositions formed early in life which then mutually influence one another throughout our lives (Bakker et al. 2021a).

It should be emphasized that my point here is not to downplay the importance of personality for understanding political attitudes. Rather, my goal has been to better understand the underlying sources of their connection. My findings suggest that personality traits and political trust are closely connected dispositions both formed early in life, and that personality traits to some extent represent underlying formative experiences and inherited dispositions which also explain our political attitudes. Future research could try to identify the specific mechanisms underlying these shared formative pathways between personality and political trust (Friesen and Ksiazkiewicz 2015; Ksiazkiewicz and Friesen 2021).

The relationship between personality traits and political attitudes is, therefore, likely to be complex. For one thing, while it seems likely that political trust is formed earlier in life than earlier research presumed, the processes by which political trust is formed in early life are not well understood, and neither is the role of personality traits in these processes. It may be that political trust and personality are formed by separate processes and there is indeed no connection between the two, but this seems unlikely. Instead, several inherited and environmental pathways are likely to link personality traits and political trust in

early life, and further research could, where possible, seek to identify these processes, for example by using longitudinal data with repeated measures of personality and political trust.

Supplementary material: Supplementary material for this article can be found at [Production team to insert link].

Data availability statement: Replication data for this paper can be found at doi:10.7910/DVN/HONWD8.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the editors at the *British Journal of Political Science* for their constructive and helpful feedback. I would also like to thank James Tilley, Rachel Bernhard, Daniel Devine, Qinya Feng, Spyros Kosmidis, Ben Seyd, and Viktor Valgarðsson for their encouragement and for their detailed comments on earlier versions of this paper. Any remaining errors are my own.

Financial support: This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant number ES/P000649/1). The Minnesotan data were collected with the financial support of the National Science Foundation in the form of SES-0721378, PI: John R. Hibbing; Co-PIs: John R. Alford, Lindon J. Eaves, Carolyn L. Funk, Peter K. Hatemi, and Kevin B. Smith, and with the cooperation of the Minnesota Twin Registry at the University of Minnesota, Robert Krueger and Matthew McGue, Directors. The Adolescent Health data were funded by grant P01 HD31921 from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, with cooperative funding from 23 other federal agencies and foundations. Add Health is currently directed by Robert A. Hummer at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Add Health was designed by J. Richard Udry, Peter S. Bearman, and Kathleen Mullan Harris at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The restricted-use Add Health data analysed in this study were accessed and used under Add Health Restricted-Use Data Contract No. 06032301 .

Competing interests: None.

References

- Ahlskog, R. (2023). "Extraversion Probably Does Not Cause Political Participation: Evidence from Two Genetically Informed Designs". *Political Psychology* 44(6), 1301–1318.
- Ahlskog, R. and S. Oskarsson (2023). "Quantifying Bias from Measurable and Unmeasurable Confounders Across Three Domains of Individual Determinants of Political Preferences". *Political Analysis* 31(2), 181–194.
- Almlund, M. et al. (2011). *Personality Psychology and Economics*. Cambridge, Mass: National Bureau of Economic Research.
- Aloe, Ariel M and Christopher G Thompson (2013). "The synthesis of partial effect sizes". *Journal of the Society for Social Work and Research* 4(4), 390–405.
- Anderson, Mary (2010a). *Community identity and political behavior*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Anderson, Mary (2010b). "Community psychology, political efficacy, and trust". *Political Psychology* 31(1), 59–84.
- Arceneaux, Kevin et al. (2025). "A critical evaluation and research agenda for the study of psychological dispositions and political attitudes". *Political Psychology* 46(1), 7–37.
- Ares, M. and E. Hernández (2017). "The Corrosive Effect of Corruption on Trust in Politicians: Evidence from a Natural Experiment". *Research & Politics* 4(2), 2053168017714185.
- Ashton, Michael C, Sampo V Paunonen, and Kibeom Lee (2014). "On the validity of narrow and broad personality traits: A response to Salgado, Moscoso, and Berges (2013)". *Personality and Individual Differences* 56, 24–28.
- Bakker, B.N. (2017). "Personality Traits, Income, and Economic Ideology". *Political Psychology* 38(6), 1025–1041.
- Bakker, B.N. and Y. Lelkes (2018). "Selling Ourselves Short? How Abbreviated Measures of Personality Change the Way We Think About Personality and Politics". *The Journal of Politics* 80(4), 1311–1325.
- Bakker, B.N., Y. Lelkes, and A. Malka (2021a). "Reconsidering the Link Between Self-Reported Personality Traits and Political Preferences". *American Political Science Review* 115(4), 1482–1498.
- Bakker, B.N., G. Schumacher, and M. Rooduijn (2021b). "The Populist Appeal: Personality and Anti-establishment Communication". *The Journal of Politics* 83(2), 589–601.
- Baldasaro, Ruth E, Michael J Shanahan, and Daniel J Bauer (2013). "Psychometric properties of the Mini-IPIP in a large, nationally representative sample of young adults". *Journal of Personality Assessment* 95(1), 74–84.
- Blais, A. and S.L. St-Vincent (2011). "Personality Traits, Political Attitudes and the Propensity to Vote". *European Journal of Political Research* 50(3), 395–417.
- Bleidorn, W. et al. (2022). "Personality Stability and Change: A Meta-Analysis of Longitudinal Studies". *Psychological Bulletin* 148(7-8), 588.
- Bleidorn, Wiebke (2015). "What accounts for personality maturation in early adulthood?" *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 24(3), 245–252.
- Bleidorn, Wiebke et al. (2021). "Personality trait stability and change". *Personality Science* 2(1), e6009.
- Boston, J. et al. (2018). "The Dynamic Relationship Between Personality Stability and Political Attitudes". *Public Opinion Quarterly* 82(S1), 843–865.

- Bromme, L., T. Rothmund, and F. Azevedo (2022). “Mapping Political Trust and Involvement in the Personality Space—A Meta-Analysis and New Evidence”. *Journal of Personality* 90(6), 846–872.
- Bøggild, T. and C. Jensen (2024). “When Politicians Behave Badly: Political, Democratic, and Social Consequences of Political Incivility”. *American Journal of Political Science* 69(3), 1064–1081.
- Caprara, G.V. et al. (2006). “Personality and Politics: Values, Traits, and Political Choice”. *Political Psychology* 27(1), 1–28.
- Catterberg, Gabriela and Alejandro Moreno (2006). “The individual bases of political trust: Trends in new and established democracies”. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* 18(1), 31–48.
- Cawvey, M. (2023). “Extraversion and External Efficacy: The Moderating Role of Corruption”. *Political Psychology* 44(1), 157–176.
- Cawvey, M. et al. (2018). “Biological and Psychological Influences on Interpersonal and Political Trust”. In: *The Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust*. Ed. by Eric Uslaner. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 119–148.
- Charney, Evan and William English (2013). “Genopolitics and the Science of Genetics”. *American Political Science Review* 107(2), 382–395.
- Colombo, Francesco, Peter Thisted Dinesen, and Kim Mannemar Sønderskov (2025). “Does economic inequality reduce political system support? Local-level evidence from Denmark”. *European Journal of Political Research* 64(2), 887–899.
- Costa, Paul T. Jr. and Robert R. McCrae (1994). “Set like plaster? Evidence for the stability of adult personality”. In: *Can Personality Change?* Ed. by Todd F. Heatherton and Joel L. Weinberger. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 21–40.
- Costa, P.T. and R.R. McCrae (1980). “Influence of Extraversion and Neuroticism on Subjective Well-being: Happy and Unhappy People”. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 38(4), 668.
- Costa Jr, Paul T and Robert R McCrae (1992). “The five-factor model of personality and its relevance to personality disorders”. *Journal of Personality Disorders* 6(4), 343–359.
- Costa Jr, P.T., R.R. McCrae, and C.E. Löckenhoff (2019). “Personality Across the Life Span”. *Annual Review of Psychology* 70(1), 423–448.
- Dawes, C. et al. (2014). “The Relationship Between Genes, Psychological Traits, and Political Participation”. *American Journal of Political Science* 58(4), 888–903.
- Devine, D. and V.O. Valgarðsson (2024). “Stability and Change in Political Trust: Evidence and Implications from Six Panel Studies”. *European Journal of Political Research* 63(2), 478–497.
- Devine, Daniel (2024). “Does Political Trust Matter? A Meta-analysis on the Consequences of Trust”. *Political Behavior* 46(4), 1–22.
- Dinesen, Peter Thisted, Merlin Schaeffer, and Kim Mannemar Sønderskov (2020). “Ethnic diversity and social trust: A narrative and meta-analytical review”. *Annual Review of Political Science* 23(1), 441–465.
- Dinesen, Peter Thisted et al. (2022). “Close (causally connected) cousins? Evidence on the causal relationship between political trust and social trust”. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 86(3), 708–721.
- Dinesen, P.T., A.S. Nørgaard, and R. Klemmensen (2014). “The Civic Personality: Personality and Democratic Citizenship”. *Political Studies* 62(1), 134–152.

- Dohmen, Thomas et al. (2008). “Representative trust and reciprocity: Prevalence and determinants”. *Economic Inquiry* 46(1), 84–90.
- Donnellan, M Brent et al. (2006). “The mini-IPIP scales: tiny-yet-effective measures of the Big Five factors of personality.” *Psychological Assessment* 18(2), 192.
- Doucouliaagos, Chris (2011). “How large is large? Preliminary and relative guidelines for interpreting partial correlations in economics”. *Deakin University Report*, <https://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30106880>.
- Dynes, A.M., H.J. Hassell, and M.R. Miles (2019). “The Personality of the Politically Ambitious”. *Political Behavior* 41, 309–336.
- Fatke, M. (2017). “Personality Traits and Political Ideology: A First Global Assessment”. *Political Psychology* 38(5), 881–899.
- Feher, Anita and Philip A Vernon (2021). “Looking beyond the Big Five: A selective review of alternatives to the Big Five model of personality”. *Personality and Individual Differences* 169, 110002.
- Feng, Qinya (2025). “Triangulating the Relationship Between Education and Attitudes Toward Immigration”. *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 12(2), 135–150.
- Freitag, M. and K. Ackermann (2016). “Direct Democracy and Institutional Trust: Relationships and Differences Across Personality Traits”. *Political Psychology* 37(5), 707–723.
- Freitag, Markus and Paul C Bauer (2016). “Personality traits and the propensity to trust friends and strangers”. *The Social Science Journal* 53(4), 467–476.
- Friesen, Amanda and Aleksander Ksiazkiewicz (2015). “Do political attitudes and religiosity share a genetic path?” *Political Behavior* 37(4), 791–818.
- Gerber, A.S. et al. (2011). “Personality Traits and Participation in Political Processes”. *The Journal of Politics* 73(3), 692–706.
- Godefroidt, Amélie (2023). “How terrorism does (and does not) affect citizens’ political attitudes: a meta-analysis”. *American Journal of Political Science* 67(1), 22–38.
- Goldberg, L.R. (1992). “The Development of Markers for the Big-Five Factor Structure”. *Psychological Assessment* 4(1), 26.
- Gosling, S.D., P.J. Rentfrow, and W.B. Swann Jr (2003). “A Very Brief Measure of the Big-Five Personality Domains”. *Journal of Research in Personality* 37(6), 504–528.
- Harris, Kathleen Mullan et al. (2013). “The national longitudinal study of adolescent health (add health) sibling pairs data”. *Twin Research and Human Genetics* 16(1), 391–398.
- Hatemi, Peter et al. (2016). *Minnesota Twins Political Survey Data*. Version V1. National Science Foundation (SES-0721378). University of Minnesota Twin Registry.
- Hatemi, Peter K et al. (2009). “Genetic and environmental transmission of political attitudes over a life time”. *The Journal of Politics* 71(3), 1141–1156.
- Hatemi, Peter K et al. (2010). “Not by twins alone: Using the extended family design to investigate genetic influence on political beliefs”. *American Journal of Political Science* 54(3), 798–814.
- Hatemi, P.K. and B. Verhulst (2015). “Political Attitudes Develop Independently of Personality Traits”. *PLoS One* 10(3), e0118106.
- Hatemi, P.K. et al. (2014). “Genetic Influences on Political Ideologies: Twin Analyses of 19 Measures of Political Ideologies from Five Democracies and Genome-wide Findings from Three Populations”. *Behavior Genetics* 44(3), 282–294.

- Hibbing, M.V., M. Ritchie, and M.R. Anderson (2011). "Personality and Political Discussion". *Political Behavior* 33(4), 601–624.
- Hiraishi, Kai et al. (2008). "Maintenance of genetic variation in personality through control of mental mechanisms: A test of trust, extraversion, and agreeableness". *Evolution and Human Behavior* 29(2), 79–85.
- Hirsh, J.B. et al. (2010). "Compassionate Liberals and Polite Conservatives: Associations of Agreeableness with Political Ideology and Moral Values". *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 36(5), 655–664.
- Hooghe, Marc, Ruth Dassonneville, and Sofie Marien (2015). "The impact of education on the development of political trust: Results from a five-year panel study among late adolescents and young adults in Belgium". *Political Studies* 63(1), 123–141.
- Jang, K.L., W.J. Livesley, and P.A. Vernon (1996). "Heritability of the Big Five Personality Dimensions and Their Facets: A Twin Study". *Journal of Personality* 64(3), 577–592.
- John, O.P., E.M. Donahue, and R.L. Kentle (1991). *The Big Five Inventory - Versions 4a and 5*. Berkeley, CA: University of California, Berkeley (Institute of Personality and Social Research).
- John, O.P., L.P. Naumann, and C.J. Soto (2008). "Paradigm Shift to the Integrative Big Five Trait Taxonomy". In: *Handbook of Personality: Theory and Research*. Ed. by R.W. Robins O.P. John and L.A. Pervin. Vol. 3. 2, 114–158.
- Jost, J.T., B.A. Nosek, and S.D. Gosling (2008). "Ideology: Its Resurgence in Social, Personality, and Political Psychology". *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3(2), 126–136.
- Kandler, C., W. Bleidorn, and R. Riemann (2012). "Left or Right? Sources of Political Orientation: The Roles of Genetic Factors, Cultural Transmission, Assortative Mating, and Personality". *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 102(3), 633.
- Keller, Matthew C, Sarah E Medland, and Laramie E Duncan (2010). "Are extended twin family designs worth the trouble? A comparison of the bias, precision, and accuracy of parameters estimated in four twin family models". *Behavior Genetics* 40(3), 377–393.
- Kelly, E. and J. Tilley (2024). "Misconduct by Voters' Own Representatives Does Not Affect Voters' Generalized Political Trust". *British Journal of Political Science* 54(4), 1496–1505.
- Kelly, E., J. Tilley, and S. Oskarsson (2026). "Revisiting the Link Between Political Trust and Political Participation". *Journal of Politics* 88(3).
- Kelly, Edmund (2026). "Replication Data for: Personality traits and political trust". *Harvard Dataverse*, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/HONWD8>.
- Kettlewell, N. and A. Tymula (2024). "Heritability Across Different Domains of Trust". *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* 219, 549–563.
- Kim-Leffingwell, S. (2023). "Personality Traits, Democratic Support, and Authoritarian Nostalgia". *Social Science Quarterly* 104(4), 619–635.
- Kitamura, Toshinori and Shigeki Fujihara (2003). "Understanding personality traits from early life experiences". *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* 57(3), 323–331.
- Ksiazkiewicz, Aleksander and Amanda Friesen (2021). "The higher power of religiosity over personality on political ideology". *Political Behavior* 43(2), 637–661.

- La Roi, Chaïm, Carmen van Alebeek, and Tom van der Meer (2025). “Socialized to (Dis) trust? A Panel Study into the Origins of Dispositional Institutional Trust”. *Social Indicators Research* 178(1), 371–391.
- Levi, M. and L. Stoker (2000). “Political Trust and Trustworthiness”. *Annual Review of Political Science* 3(1), 475–507.
- Marien, Sofie (2017). “Assessing the role of television, the family, and the school in the development of political trust in adolescence”. *Social Science Quarterly* 98(3), 818–835.
- Mattila, M. and L. Rapeli (2018). “Just Sick of It? Health and Political Trust in Western Europe”. *European Journal of Political Research* 57(1), 116–134.
- Mayne, Quinton and Armen Hakhverdian (2017). “Education, socialization, and political trust”. In: *Handbook on political trust*. Edward Elgar Publishing, 176–196.
- McCrae, R.R. et al. (1998). “Cross-Cultural Assessment of the Five-Factor Model: The Revised NEO Personality Inventory”. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 29(1), 171–188.
- Medland, Sarah E and Peter K Hatemi (2009). “Political science, biometric theory, and twin studies: A methodological introduction”. *Political Analysis* 17(2), 191–214.
- Miklikowska, M. (2012). “Psychological Underpinnings of Democracy: Empathy, Authoritarianism, Self-Esteem, Interpersonal Trust, Normative Identity Style, and Openness to Experience as Predictors of Support for Democratic Values”. *Personality and Individual Differences* 53(5), 603–608.
- Mondak, J.J. (2010). *Personality and the Foundations of Political Behavior*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mondak, J.J. and K.D. Halperin (2008). “A Framework for the Study of Personality and Political Behavior”. *British Journal of Political Science* 38(2), 335–362.
- Mondak, J.J., M. Hayes, and D. Canache (2017). “Biological and Psychological Influences on Political Trust”. In: *Handbook on Political Trust*. Ed. by Tom van der Meer and Sonja Zmerli. Edward Elgar Publishing, 143–159.
- Muñoz, Jordi (2017). “Political trust and multilevel government”. In: *Handbook on Political Trust*. Ed. by Tom van der Meer and Sonja Zmerli. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 69–88.
- Neale, Michael and Lon Cardon (2013). *Methodology for genetic studies of twins and families*. Vol. 67. Dordrecht: Springer Science & Business Media.
- Ojeda, Christopher (2016). “The effect of 9/11 on the heritability of political trust”. *Political Psychology* 37(1), 73–88.
- Paternoster, Raymond et al. (1998). “Using the correct statistical test for the equality of regression coefficients”. *Criminology* 36(4), 859–866.
- Polderman, T.J. et al. (2015). “Meta-Analysis of the Heritability of Human Traits Based on Fifty Years of Twin Studies”. *Nature Genetics* 47(7), 702–709.
- Posthuma, Daniëlle and Dorret I Boomsma (2000). “A note on the statistical power in extended twin designs”. *Behavior Genetics* 30(2), 147–158.
- Rafienia, Parvin et al. (2008). “The role of extraversion, neuroticism and positive and negative mood in emotional information processing”. *Personality and Individual Differences* 44(2), 392–402.
- Rammstedt, B., C.J. Kemper, and I. Borg (2013). “Correcting Big Five Personality Measurements for Acquiescence: An 18-Country Cross-Cultural Study”. *European Journal of Personality* 27(1), 71–81.

- Rasmussen, Stig Hebbelstrup Rye, Steven Ludeke, and Jacob VB Hjelmberg (2019). "A major limitation of the direction of causation model: non-shared environmental confounding". *Twin Research and Human Genetics* 22(1), 14–26.
- Riemann, R., A. Angleitner, and J. Strelau (1997). "Genetic and Environmental Influences on Personality: A Study of Twins Reared Together Using the Self- and Peer-Report NEO-FFI Scales". *Journal of Personality* 65(3), 449–475.
- Roberts, Brent W and Wendy F DelVecchio (2000). "The rank-order consistency of personality traits from childhood to old age: a quantitative review of longitudinal studies." *Psychological Bulletin* 126(1), 3.
- Roberts, Brent W, Kate E Walton, and Wolfgang Viechtbauer (2006). "Patterns of mean-level change in personality traits across the life course: a meta-analysis of longitudinal studies." *Psychological Bulletin* 132(1), 1.
- Roberts, Brent W, Dustin Wood, and Jennifer L Smith (2005). "Evaluating five factor theory and social investment perspectives on personality trait development". *Journal of Research in Personality* 39(1), 166–184.
- Roberts, B.W. et al. (2007). "The Power of Personality: The Comparative Validity of Personality Traits, Socioeconomic Status, and Cognitive Ability for Predicting Important Life Outcomes". *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 2(4), 313–345.
- Robertson, F. (2024). "Who Reduces Political Trust After Experiencing Corruption? Introducing the Role of Personality Traits". *International Political Science Review* 45(4), 490–505.
- Schoen, H. and S. Schumann (2007). "Personality Traits, Partisan Attitudes, and Voting Behavior. Evidence from Germany". *Political Psychology* 28(4), 471–498.
- Schoon, I. and H. Cheng (2011). "Determinants of Political Trust: A Lifetime Learning Model". *Developmental Psychology* 47(3), 619.
- Schoon, I. et al. (2010). "Social Status, Cognitive Ability, and Educational Attainment as Predictors of Liberal Social Attitudes and Political Trust". *Intelligence* 38(1), 144–150.
- Sønderskov, Kim Mannemar and Peter Thisted Dinesen (2016). "Trusting the state, trusting each other? The effect of institutional trust on social trust". *Political Behavior* 38, 179–202.
- Srivastava, Sanjay et al. (2003). "Development of personality in early and middle adulthood: Set like plaster or persistent change?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84(5), 1041.
- Strelan, Peter (2007). "Who forgives others, themselves, and situations? The roles of narcissism, guilt, self-esteem, and agreeableness". *Personality and Individual Differences* 42(2), 259–269.
- Sturgis, Patrick et al. (2010). "A genetic basis for social trust?" *Political Behavior* 32, 205–230.
- Van der Meer, T. and A. Hakhverdian (2017). "Political Trust as the Evaluation of Process and Performance: A Cross-National Study of 42 European Countries". *Political Studies* 65(1), 81–102.
- Van der Meer, T.W. (2017a). "Democratic Input, Macroeconomic Output and Political Trust". In: *Handbook on Political Trust*. Ed. by Tom van der Meer and Sonja Zmerli. Edward Elgar Publishing, 270–284.
- Van der Meer, T.W. (2017b). "Economic Performance and Political Trust". In: *Oxford Handbook of Social and Political Trust*. Ed. by Eric Uslaner. Edward Elgar Publishing, 599–616.
- Van Elsas, E. (2015). "Political Trust as a Rational Attitude: A Comparison of the Nature of Political Trust Across Different Levels of Education". *Political Studies* 63(5), 1158–1178.

- Vecchione, M. and G.V. Caprara (2009). “Personality Determinants of Political Participation: The Contribution of Traits and Self-Efficacy Beliefs”. *Personality and Individual Differences* 46(4), 487–492.
- Verhulst, B., L.J. Eaves, and P.K. Hatemi (2012). “Correlation Not Causation: The Relationship Between Personality Traits and Political Ideologies”. *American Journal of Political Science* 56(1), 34–51.
- Verhulst, Brad et al. (2019). “Type I error rates and parameter bias in multivariate behavioral genetic models”. *Behavior Genetics* 49(1), 99–111.
- Vukasović, T. and D. Bratko (2015). “Heritability of Personality: A Meta-Analysis of Behavior Genetic Studies”. *Psychological Bulletin* 141(4), 769.
- Weinschenk, Aaron et al. (2023). “Genes, personality, and political behavior: A replication and extension using Danish twins”. *Politics and the Life Sciences* 42(1), 4–16.
- Weinschenk, A.C. and C.T. Dawes (2017). “The Relationship Between Genes, Personality Traits, and Political Interest”. *Political Research Quarterly* 70(3), 467–479.
- Weinschenk, A.C. and C.T. Dawes (2018). “Genes, Personality Traits, and the Sense of Civic Duty”. *American Politics Research* 46(1), 47–76.
- Weinschenk, A.C. and C.T. Dawes (2019). “The Genetic and Psychological Underpinnings of Generalized Social Trust”. *Journal of Trust Research* 9(1), 47–65.