Personality and Legislative Politics: The Big Five Trait Dimensions Among U.S. State Legislators

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The impact of personality traits on people's attitudes and behaviors is widely recognized, yet systematic attention to personality in large-N research on elected officials has been rare. Among psychologists, five-factor frameworks that focus on openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability have gained tremendous prominence in the past two decades. Applications of these frameworks to the study of mass political behavior have been highly fruitful, but corresponding applications in the study of legislators have been rare. In an effort to assess the utility of a Big Five approach in the study of legislative politics, this article addresses three questions: whether elected officials will be willing to provide personality self-assessments, whether any data they do provide will exhibit meaningful variance, and whether the Big Five trait dimensions will correspond with patterns in respondents' attitudes and behaviors. These questions are addressed using data from members of the state legislatures in Arizona, Connecticut, and Maine. Results provide considerable grounds for optimism regarding the likely utility of more extensive applications of the Big Five in research on elected officials.

KEY WORDS: personality, Big Five, elite politics, state legislatures

In most circumstances, how an individual behaves reflects the joint influence of factors intrinsic to the person and factors related to the context. For instance, if the question is where to go for lunch, the answer will depend partly on whether the diner is a strict meat-and-potatoes type or someone for whom more exotic fare is the norm, and partly on whether the person has a leisurely two hours or a quick 30 minutes before a scheduled afternoon meeting. In the political arena, whether a voter will

opt to retain the district's U.S. House member will hinge in part on individual-level factors such as the person's party identification, but also in part on aspects of the electoral context such as the presence of a strong challenger.

In this article, our focus is on the attitudes and behaviors of elected officials, and, more specifically, on legislators. We work from the assumption that, as with other forms of human behavior, the behavior of the legislator likely will reflect the influence of institutional norms and structures, but also individualistic factors such as the representative's political predispositions and values, motivations, and patterns of interaction with others. Legislators differ from one another on a wide array of matters. Some are stridently ideological while others seek moderation and compromise. Some thirst for higher office while others harbor no such ambition. Some relish campaigning and interacting with constituents while others absorb themselves in crafting the fine details of legislation. Some seek media attention while others prefer to work in relative anonymity. To some extent, these sorts of differences emerge in response to the varied situations legislators face. But these differences in behavior also are influenced by legislators' basic psychological tendencies—that is, by their personalities. Thus, we contend that attention to personality can help explain fundamental elements of legislators' political predispositions and patterns of behavior.

Our particular interest concerns the means by which scholars might obtain and utilize data on legislators' personalities as part of large-N analyses. When examining one or just a few individuals, the analyst can explore personality with a level of depth that is not feasible for an investigation involving dozens, or even hundreds, of legislators. Instead, such a broad-scale analysis requires a means to obtain data in systematic, comparable, and efficient form. One potentially viable approach entails using self-reports or reports from others to gather data on legislators' personality traits. We follow such a course in this study. Specifically, data on the Big Five personality trait dimensions—openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability—have been obtained from legislators in three U.S. states. These data are introduced to examine a few key prefatory issues: whether legislators will provide personality self-reports; whether any such personality data will exhibit meaningful variance; and whether the observed variance will correspond with patterns in phenomena such as legislators' enduring political orientations, career paths, and attitudes toward legislative tasks.

Although our purpose in this study is to address pragmatic considerations in the application of the Big Five to the study of legislators, such an endeavor presupposes that there might be value in studying legislators' personalities, and, more specifically, in examining the Big Five trait dimensions. Hence, as a prelude to our empirical analyses, we first discuss how and why variance in personality might influence patterns in legislative behavior. In doing so, we review what prior scholars have found in research on legislators and personality, and we detail the particular utility that may be associated with inquiry focused on the Big Five framework.

Legislators and Personality

This investigation proceeds from the two fold assumption that insight may be gained from studying the personalities of legislators, and that, in particular, a Big Five approach is likely to be fruitful. Personality is a multifaceted and enduring psychological structure that influences behavior. Following Winter (2003b), we conceive of personality traits as "the public, observable element of personality" (p. 115). At question is how and why systematic attention to the personality traits of legislators might be illuminating. In addressing this question, we begin with a general discussion of the relevance of personality-based research on legislators. Following this, we turn to the more specific matter of the Big Five framework.

Understanding Legislative Behavior

The general proposition that personality influences patterns in behavior is extraordinarily well-supported in empirical research on personality, but it does not necessarily follow that personality matters for the actions of legislators. If how a legislator behaves in a given situation is very tightly constrained by institutional structures, rules, and norms, then the particular characteristics of the individual would be of little or no relevance. But we contend that institutional forces are not so powerful as to make characteristics of the individual irrelevant. Although environmental factors do shape legislative behavior, past research on personality and politics provides ample support for the proposition that differences in personality also are influential.

Research on the personalities of political elites enjoys a long and rich history, although systematic work specific to legislators has been more sporadic.[1] Personality can be examined in multiple ways. Many classic studies of public officials and other political actors have been small-N works devoted to the in-depth psychological analysis of one or a handful of subjects (e.g., Barber, 1992; George & George, 1964; Kearns, 1976; Lasswell, 1930; Latcham, 1982). Although such approaches can generate considerable insight regarding the motivations of the individual, our concern with personality involves the possible identification of patterns across multiple actors. Hence, for our purposes, information on the personalities of legislators ideally will be obtained in a comparable, quantifiable form, such as through systematic analysis of archival information or via administration of a self-report or third-person survey that includes items on personality.

Because of its sparse nature, there has been little cumulative trajectory to the literature on personality and legislators in terms of either theoretical approaches or empirical findings. In part, the track record is somewhat thin because scholarship in the field of personality psychology was in disarray for a prolonged period, making it difficult for students of legislative politics to draw on insights from psychology as a means to develop viable large-N studies. As we argue below, the emergence of five-factor models offers an opportunity to make unprecedented progress in understanding the psychological underpinnings of legislative behavior. Still, scholars have published occasional reports on this subject for decades. These past works reveal that valuable insights can be derived from personality data. The present study builds on these prior efforts.

Survey-based measures of legislators' personality traits have been reported by several scholars.[2] McConaughy (1950) administered a series of personality batteries to 18 members of the South Carolina legislature, and also to two control groups, members of a service organization and some recent college graduates. Differences between the mass and elite samples were observed on several traits. For instance, legislators scored lower in neuroticism and higher in extraversion than did members of the citizen samples. Hennessy (1959) employed a similar approach, surveying legislators and other political activists in Arizona, together with members of the general public. Hennessy did not detect differences between "politicals" and "apoliticals" on most traits, but did find that the former scored higher on a measure of "power drive."

Moving beyond the matter of mass-elite differences, Barber (1965), Costantini and Craik (1980), and Stone and Baril (1979) sought to determine whether personality influenced the attitudes and behaviors of public officials. Barber (1965) conducted in-depth interviews with 27 first-term members of the Connecticut legislature, deriving from this exercise a classification of legislators as

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[1] For a recent review of research on personality and political elites, see Winter (2003a). Historically, much of the research on personality and politics at the elite level has focused on chief executives, and especially U.S. presidents. Greenstein's influential work (e.g., Greenstein, 2003, 2004) exemplifies inquiry in this tradition.

[2] Past research on personality traits among members of U.S. state legislatures relates most directly to the analyses we report below, but it warrants note that similar approaches have been applied in research on other public officials. Examples include research on members of the California judiciary (Gibson, 1981), the Italian parliament (DiRenzo, 1967), the Japanese Diet (Feldman, 1994), and local city councils (Wiegele & Oots, 1990).

Spectators, Advertisers, Reluctants, and Lawmakers. Costantini and Craik (1980) administered a series of personality batteries to California party leaders and found that Democratic and Republican leaders differed on several traits. For instance, Republican leaders scored higher than their Democratic counterparts on order and self-control, traits that are related to dependability and responsiveness to obligations. Democrats, in turn, scored high on lability, a trait that captures an impetus toward new experience and change. Stone and Baril (1979) surveyed first-term members of the Maine legislature to acquire data on self-esteem and self-complexity. These traits, and especially their interaction, proved consequential for several facets of legislative behavior including legislative activity (number of bills introduced).

Collectively, these prior works reveal that state legislators and other public officials have been willing to provide personality self-reports and that the resulting data shed light on various aspects of legislative behavior.[3] But despite these early successes, systematic research on the personalities of political elites has not become commonplace. Like these earlier scholars, we believe that information on legislators' personality traits can contribute greatly to our understanding of political phenomena. However, if for no other reason than the sheer passage of time, we believe that the willingness of legislators to offer personality self-assessments must be revisited. After all, there is little point in contemplating the possible significance of legislators' personalities if personality data are unavailable. Another point that warrants reconsideration is which aspects of personality should be examined. On this matter, we advocate focusing on psychology's Big Five framework, especially for early second-generation forays into the study of legislators and personality.

The Big Five Approach

Five-factor models of personality trait structure began to gain prominence among students of trait psychology in the late 1980s and early 1990s (e.g., Digman, 1990; Goldberg, 1990; McCrae & Costa, 1987). Today, applied research on the Big Five far outpaces that on other models of trait structure, with hundreds of works being published in each of the past several years (for a discussion, see John, Naumann, & Soto, 2008). Advocates of five-factor approaches argue that the trait dimensions of openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability combine to represent the bulk of trait structure in a parsimonious form. A Big Five approach provides a useful framework for initial efforts to explore personality effects in a given research area, and the trait taxonomy is especially conducive to the accumulation of an integrated body of empirical findings.

Political scientists have been slower than scholars in other disciplines to incorporate the Big Five in their studies, but numerous applications, especially to the study of mass politics, have appeared in the past few years.[4] Collectively, these works have identified links between the Big Five trait dimensions and numerous variables of interest to students of mass politics, including ideology, partisanship, policy attitudes, political interest, efficacy, knowledge, information exposure, and participation. These successful applications are quite encouraging, bringing confidence that similar applications in inquiries regarding elite politics also will prove fruitful.

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[3] Beyond the works discussed here, other authors also note the likely role of personality in influencing legislative behavior. For instance, Fenno's (1978) classic study emphasizes that future scholars should account for personality. Similarly, Reeher (2006, p. 93) emphasizes that state legislators require "thick skin," which he relates to previous personality studies. To Reeher (2006, p. 101), politicians must have "strong emotional structures" in order to survive the trials and tribulations of political life. This part of Reeher's (2006) analysis could easily be recast in terms of personality. Winter (2003b) develops such a link, noting that "personality affects leaders' persistence, endurance, and management of emotions" (p. 112).

[4] Examples include Barbaranelli, Caprara, Vecchione, and Fraley (2007); Caprara, Schwartz, Capanna, Vecchione, and Barbaranelli (2006); Gerber, Huber, Doherty, and Dowling (2011a); Gerber et al. (2011b), Gerber, Huber, Doherty, Dowling, and Ha (2010); Mondak (2010); Mondak, Canache, Seligson, and Hibbing (2011); Mondak and Halperin (2008); Schoen (2007); Schoen and Schumann (2007); and Vecchione and Caprara (2009).

In light of the emergence of the Big Five and the insights it has brought to the study of mass politics, we believe renewed attention to personality and legislative behavior is warranted. However, we are aware of only one prior study (Best, 2011) that applies the Big Five in research regarding legislators. Best (2011) gathered Big Five data from members of the German population and from over 1,200 state and national legislators. Although Best does not note the link between his findings and those of past inquiries regarding personality and legislative behavior, his mass-elite contrasts yield results reminiscent of McConaughy's (1950), including evidence that legislators score higher than the mass population in terms of extraversion and lower in terms of neuroticism.[5] Best's analyses yield more modest evidence that personality matters for patterns in legislative behavior and for legislators' policy stances.

Best's results suggest the value in application of the Big Five framework in research on legislative behavior, but numerous questions remain (Best, 2011). Indeed, full exploration of the possible significance of the Big Five trait dimensions in the legislative arena will require a multi-faceted research agenda. As one component of such an agenda, we address a series of key prefatory matters. Specifically, we seek to ascertain whether there are any noteworthy obstacles inherent in obtaining personality self-reports from legislators, whether Big Five data from legislators exhibit variance, and whether the Big Five traits correspond in sensible, theory-consistent manners with legislators' political views and attitudes toward legislative tasks.

Data

Data for the present study were obtained from an internet-based survey of legislators in three U.S. states, Arizona, Connecticut, and Maine. Legislators were contacted in late 2009 and early 2010, and asked to complete the 43-item self-administered survey. Respondents were assured that the survey was confidential, and no identifying information was obtained. Telephone numbers and e-mail addresses for two of the investigators were provided to respondents; in no instance did a legislator contact an investigator to express concerns regarding confidentiality. The primary substantive focus of the survey was public funding of legislative elections. The three states where the survey was administered all have implemented public funding programs, and the survey probed legislators' experiences with their states' public funding systems.[6] Additional questions addressed matters such as partisanship, ideology, length of legislative service, and attitudes toward aspects of legislative behavior. Five questions concerned personality.

The Arizona legislature has a total of 90 members, whereas Connecticut's legislature has 187 and Maine's has 188. A total of 99 legislators answered at least some items on the survey, for an overall response rate of 21%.[7] Response rates by state are 21% for Arizona, 17% for Connecticut, and 26% for Maine.

Single-item measures were used to represent the Big Five personality traits. In psychological research on the properties of the Big Five trait dimensions, very large batteries often are used, with as many as 60 items per trait dimension. As scholars have moved to conduct more applied research

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[5] Best interprets the evidence of mass-elite differences as signaling that personality matters for legislative recruitment. Depending on one's definition of "recruitment," this is a plausible interpretation, but caution is warranted regarding this conclusion. In Best's study (Best, 2011), there are personality differences between the mass sample and the sample of elected officials, but there is no means to determine at what point this difference emerged. One possibility is that candidates for legislative offices collectively differ from the mass public, but a second possibility is that *winning* candidates differ from both the mass public and from losing candidates. A full test of Best's selection hypothesis would require personality data on winning and losing legislative candidates, and perhaps also on prospective candidates. Research along these lines is to be encouraged.

[6] A nostalgic reason for selecting these states is that legislators in all three have been subjects in previous research on personality and legislative behavior via Hennessy's (1959) work in Arizona, the Barber (1965) study in Connecticut, and Stone and Baril's (1979) examination of first-term members of the Maine legislature.

[7] As noted below, five respondents answered only a handful of items. If we treat the number of valid responses as 94, this would yield an overall response rate of just over 20%.

on the Big Five, the need for brief batteries has become evident, and several teams of psychologists have worked to develop measures of the Big Five that require only one or two items per trait dimension (e.g., Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003; Rammstedt & John, 2007; Woods & Hampson, 2005). Applied research on implications of the Big Five for political behavior typically has used brief scales (e.g., Best, 2011; Gerber et al., 2010; Mondak & Halperin, 2008; Mondak, Hibbing, Canache, Seligson, & Anderson, 2010). We had two reasons for following a similar course here. First, it seemed unlikely to us that many legislators would be willing to respond to a lengthy personality battery or that many scholars conducting surveys of legislators would be willing and able to devote substantial amounts of survey space to personality. Second, the use of brief measures inherently makes for more conservative multivariate tests. Our measures are, by construction, relatively coarse. If even these measures can be shown to be useful in analyses of legislative behavior, it would be reasonable to infer that even greater insight could be derived in inquiries making use of richer and more nuanced trait measures.

The trait items used a univocal, four-category response format. Respondents read the prompt "To what extent do you agree or disagree that the following terms apply to you?" They then answered "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," or "strongly disagree." The terms posed to the respondents are: "open-minded, has an active imagination"; "tidy and well-organized, highly conscientious"; "extraverted, outgoing and sociable"; "agreeable, generally trusting"; and "emotionally stable, relaxed and handles stress well."[8] We devised these word sets by pairing a term that captures the essence of each trait dimension (e.g., "extraverted") with a phrase used by psychologists in corresponding trait batteries. Four of the five phrases we included are drawn from Rammstedt and John's (2007) one-minute Big Five scale. The exception is "tidy and well-organized," which is adapted from Costa and McCrae (1992).[9]

Data from the five personality items are central in our analyses. We explore both the properties of legislators' responses to these questions and the possible influence of personality on legislators' attitudes and behaviors.

Personality and the Legislator

Data from the legislator survey are used to examine the logistical feasibility and analytical utility of obtaining personality data from elected officials. Three questions are considered: whether legislators will be willing to provide personality self-assessments, whether personality data acquired from legislators will exhibit meaningful variance, and whether differences in personality will correspond with variance in legislators' predispositions, attitudes, and behaviors.

Will Legislators Answer Personality Questions?

Any potential utility of obtaining personality data from legislators obviously will remain unrealized if legislators balk when asked to provide personality self-reports. Past research has not encountered difficulty in acquiring personality data from legislators, but most prior studies were conducted several decades ago. Hence, we had to confront the possibility that something had

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[8] In research on mass politics, a concern researchers have faced is that some respondents do not comprehend more complex trait descriptors such as "extraverted" and "introverted," leading to high "don't know" rates for some adjectives (see Mondak [2010] for a discussion). We assumed that this matter would not be a concern in a survey of legislators. Results reported below support this assumption.

[9] For conscientiousness, the phrase used by Rammstedt and John (2007) is "does a thorough job." We passed on use of this phrase out of concern that the resulting data would exhibit little or no variance because few legislators, if any, seemingly would be willing to admit to doing less than a thorough job.

changed in the ensuing years, leaving legislators less willing to offer personality self-reports.[10] Fortunately, no such obstacle was observed. As noted above, the legislator survey included 43 items. On the eleventh and final page of the survey, the last five questions asked of respondents were the Big Five measures. Ninety-nine respondents began the survey, but five dropped out before completing even 10 questions. Of the remaining 94 respondents, one answered questions up until the point of the Big Five battery, but dropped out rather than completing the personality questions. The other 93 answered either four or all five of the personality questions, with 91 respondents answering all five. Thus, it appears that at most one respondent of 94 consciously opted against providing a self-assessment of personality.[11] These answer rates compare well with those for other items on the survey. For example, two of the 94 legislators neglected to answer a party affiliation question, and six refused to answer an item regarding family income. The bottom line is that if legislators will respond to a survey, the vast majority of them will answer items regarding personality.

Patterns in Personality Self-Report Data

The mere fact that legislators are willing to respond to survey items tapping the Big Five personality trait dimensions does not establish that the resulting data will be informative. Variation in the data could be quite limited. First, if personality influences either the desire to serve in elected office or a candidate's prospects for electoral success, then all or most legislators may exhibit similar personality traits. Second, even though our survey was anonymous, respondents may have been concerned about social desirability, leaving them unwilling to admit to possessing certain traits. Third, our use of single-item trait measures, coupled with a four-category response format, inherently limits how much variation can be observed.

Legislators' responses to the personality items are summarized in Table 1. Results are mixed with respect to the matter of variation.[12] On the plus side, with only one exception, one or more respondents opted for every available response option. Further, on the items that elicited the most positive self-assessments, those for openness and agreeableness, only slightly more than half of respondents placed themselves in the top category. However, viewed more skeptically, a minimum of 75% of respondents placed themselves in one of the top two categories on each item; for openness and emotional stability, barely 5% of respondents disagreed that they possessed these traits.

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[10] In a 2007 survey, Best (2011) obtained data from 1,233 state and national legislators in Germany, suggesting a continuing willingness of legislators, or at least those in Germany, to provide personality self-reports. Unfortunately, Best provides no information regarding his sampling procedures, the study's response rate, or the relative response rates for state and national officials.

[11] An anonymous reviewer correctly points out that one possibility we cannot reject is that potential respondents scrolled through the entire survey prior to answering any items, found all items prior to the personality questions to be acceptable, but were so disturbed by the five personality items as to refuse any participation in the survey. We see this scenario as unlikely given the lack of evidence of similar behavior by those respondents who did begin the survey: no respondent left a comment expressing concern about the personality items, and only one person of the 99 who started the survey broke off at the onset of the personality battery. Because the personality battery was placed at the end of the survey, we have no way to know whether this one respondent found the personality items to be off-putting or, after 38 prior items, simply had reached a point of fatigue with the survey. Therefore, the worst-case scenario is that a single respondent out of 94 reacted antagonistically to the presence of personality questions. As to the two respondents who each skipped one personality item, we do know that one did so because he did not feel that the terms "tidy and well-organized, highly conscientious" could be assessed as a group. The respondent included a note to this effect. The respondent raised a legitimate concern with brief Big Five batteries. The five trait dimensions are broad, and thus brief scales typically pack several terms together in an effort to capture in parsimonious form at least some of that breadth. For example, the Woods and Hampson (2005) conscientiousness single-item measure asks respondents whether they see themselves as "someone who likes to plan things, likes to tidy up, pays attention to details, but can be rigid or inflexible," as opposed to "someone who doesn't necessarily work to a schedule, tends to be flexible, but disorganized and often forgets to put things back in their proper place" (p. 388). We consciously sought to pose items with content that was not too disparate, and we find it encouraging that 91 of 93 respondents who tackled the personality batters answered all five items, and that all 93 answered at least four.

[12] In the multivariate models estimated below, the personality variables are coded 0 (respondent strongly disagrees that the description applies to the respondent) to 3 (strongly agree).

Table 1. Personality Self-Assessments of State Legislators

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Open-minded, has an active imagination (N = 93, mean = 2.46, s.d. = 0.67)	53.8	40.9	3.2	2.2
Tidy and well-organized, highly conscientious (N = 92, mean = 1.93, s.d. = 0.72)	20.7	54.3	22.8	2.2
Extraverted, outgoing and sociable (N = 92, mean = 2.20, s.d. = 0.70)	35.9	47.8	16.3	0.0
Agreeable, generally trusting (N = 93, mean = 2.23, s.d. = 0.61)	31.2	61.3	6.5	1.1
Emotionally stable, relaxed and handles stress well (N = 93, mean = 2.44, s.d. = 0.67)	51.6	43.0	3.2	2.2

Note: cell entries are row percentages.

It is unsurprising that variation in the legislator Big Five data is less pronounced than analysts have observed with data from surveys of the mass public.[13] Were we surveying sales clerks, actuaries, or members of symphony orchestras, we also would no doubt observe less variance in personality traits than is found in the mass public as a whole, assuming personality plays any role whatsoever in career choice. The McConaughy (1950) study provides early evidence on this point. But it should be clear that we have no means to determine definitively that the limited variance seen in Table 1 reflects only a genuine similarity in legislators' traits. The alternate possibility, of course, is that many of our respondents may have exaggerated the extent to which they are conscientious, agreeable, and so on. We have no doubt that such exaggeration did occur. This inherent limitation of personality self-reports provides one rationale for supplementing self-report data with other-person reports, a point to which we return in the conclusion. What we cannot conclude from Table 1 is whether the variation that does exist among legislators' responses is sufficient for the personality data to be analytically useful. Impressionistically, the distributions do not seem to be so narrow as to be debilitating. Therefore, it is conceivable, even if by no means certain, that the personality assessments provided by the state legislators hold the potential to produce new insights regarding the bases of legislators' attitudes and behaviors, notwithstanding the likely presence of at least some self-presentation bias in the data. But this ultimately is an empirical question, and thus we turn now to consider whether the variation represented in Table 1 corresponds with other facets of legislative behavior reported on our survey.[14]

The Predictive Value of Personality

In research on mass politics, the Big Five personality trait dimensions have been shown to be related to a tremendous variety of political predispositions, attitudes, and behaviors. At question in the present study is whether personality data may be of similar utility in studies concerning legislators. In developing test cases, we pursue two courses. First, we replicate key tests from the mass politics literature in an effort to determine whether the current personality data produce sensible patterns when

[13] This is not to say that distributions on mass surveys exhibit strong balance. Of our five items, two, openness and emotional stability, produce skew statistics with absolute values greater than 1.0. Similarly, on Mondak's (2010, p. 71) 25-item personality survey of the mass public, data from seven questions produced skew statistics with absolute values greater than 1.0.

[14] Beyond the matter of variability, a further issue with personality self-reports concerns whether respondents differentiate among the traits. If high inter-item correlations are observed, this might suggest response set or social desirability effects. Because the Big Five trait dimensions are not orthogonal, some correlation among them is to be expected. For instance, in one recent study using data from a national survey in the United States (Mondak et al., 2010), the average correlation among the Big Five traits was 0.25. In our legislator survey, the comparable average is 0.24.

used as independent variables in multivariate models. These initial exercises essentially function as validity checks; if the legislator personality data are not related to phenomena known from past research to correspond with personality, then this would constitute a serious indictment of current measures. Second, moving beyond validity checks, we turn to dependent variables unique to legislators, measures pertaining to political ambition and perceptions of legislative tasks.

The first two dependent variables are self-identified ideology and partisanship. Respondents were asked to place themselves on a 5-point ideology scale, with response options of liberal (0), somewhat liberal (1), moderate (2), somewhat conservative (3), and conservative (4). Of the 94 respondents who answered this item, 43.6% identified themselves as being liberal or somewhat liberal, 30.9% as moderate, and 25.5% as conservative or somewhat conservative. Party affiliation was measured using a dichotomous item; 62 legislators indicated that they are Democrats (0), whereas 30 are Republicans (1).[15]

Particularly for ideology, the Big Five framework enjoys a clear track record in the mass politics literature. Openness to experience consistently has been found to be a strong predictor of ideological liberalism, and conscientiousness performs similarly as a predictor of ideological conservatism. Further, several studies have found modest links between agreeableness and liberal identification and comparable links between emotional stability and conservatism. Lastly, extraversion routinely produces null results when included as a predictor of ideology.[16] These same patterns typically emerge in models of partisan affiliation, although personality effects often are weaker and more sporadic for partisanship than for ideology. As noted above, in research predating the emergence of the Big Five framework, Costantini and Craik's (1980) study of California party leaders identified differences between Democrats and Republicans on traits similar to those included in contemporary descriptions of openness and conscientiousness.

In testing whether personality effects emerge with our data from Arizona, Connecticut, and Maine legislators, we regress ideology and partisanship on the Big Five measures, controlling only for gender (1 = respondent is female, 0 = male; 26 respondents are female and 68 are male).[17] Ordered logistic regression is used to estimate possible personality effects on ideology, and binomial logistic regression is used for the model of partisan affiliation.

Coefficient estimates for the ideology and partisanship models are reported in Table 2. Results for ideology match strikingly well with past findings from surveys of the mass public. Even with data from a relatively small sample and using single-item personality measures, all five effects correspond with expectations: openness and agreeableness produce a tendency toward ideological liberalism, conscientiousness and emotional stability increase the likelihood of a conservative ideological identification, and extraversion yields a null result. Findings for partisan affiliation are more modest. There, only conscientiousness produces a statistically significant effect, and, among the remaining personality trait dimensions, only the effect for openness even approaches statistical significance ($p < .13$).

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[15] This distribution is consistent with that of the legislatures we surveyed. Overall, 63% of legislators in these states are Democrats versus 67% in our sample.

[16] Studies of the mass public that have found Big Five effects on ideology and/or partisan affiliation include Alford and Hibbing (2007), Barbaranelli et al. (2007), Gerber et al. (2010, 2011a, 2011b), Mondak (2010), Mondak et al. (2010), Mondak and Halperin (2008), Mondak and Hibbing (2012), Riemann, Grubich, Hempel, Mergl, and Richter (1993), Stenner (2005), and Van Hiel, Kossowska, and Mervielde (2000). Jost and his colleagues have taken a different course in examining personality effects on ideology, but they, too, have noted influences relevant to the Big Five, particularly those concerning openness and conscientiousness (e.g., Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; Jost, Federico, & Napier, 2009; Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008).

[17] It is common in applied research on the Big Five to control only for demographic attributes. Our survey does not include measures of race, age, or education, and thus the only available demographic control variable is gender. Best (2011) finds differences between male and female legislators on four of the Big Five trait dimensions, results that highlight the importance of control for gender. Additionally, Reeher (2006) reports gender differences in patterns of legislative behavior and career ambition, making gender an appropriate control given the dependent variables we examine. In alternate specifications, we also included controls for state and for whether the respondent served in the legislature's upper or lower house. In no instance did inclusion of these variables bring changes in the statistical significance or substantive importance of coefficients for the Big Five measures.

Table 2. The Influence of Personality on the Ideology and Partisan Affiliation of State Legislators

	Ideology	Partisan Affiliation
Gender (1 = female, 0 = male)	−1.43**	−1.25*
	(0.45)	(0.63)
Openness to experience (0 = low openness to 3 = high)	−1.01**	−0.63
	(0.34)	(0.42)
Conscientiousness (0 = low conscientiousness to 3 = high)	0.57*	0.86*
	(0.29)	(0.39)
Extraversion (0 = low extraversion to 3 = high)	0.27	−0.00
	(0.30)	(0.38)
Agreeableness (0 = low agreeableness to 3 = high)	−0.68#	0.13
	(0.39)	(0.50)
Emotional stability (0 = low emotional stability to 3 = high)	0.86*	0.38
	(0.35)	(0.56)
Threshold #1 (ideology); Constant (partisanship)	−2.25	−1.83
	(1.09)	(1.05)
Threshold #2	−0.85	
	(1.08)	
Threshold #3	0.76	
	(1.07)	
Threshold #4	1.55	
	(1.08)	
Number of Cases	91	90
χ^2	27.98	15.81

Note: cell entries for ideology are unstandardized ordered logistic regression coefficients and cell entries for partisan affiliation are unstandardized binomial logistic regression coefficients.
**$p < .01$ *$p < .05$ #$p < .10$.

For ideology, the substantive influence of personality is quite pronounced. The sharpest effect is for openness. As a male legislator with mean values on the other four trait dimensions moves from a score of 2 on openness to a score of 3, the predicted probability that the legislator is liberal or somewhat liberal rises from 0.25 to 0.48, and the predicted probability that the person is conservative or somewhat conservative falls from 0.38 to 0.18. The combined influence of openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness, and emotional stability also warrants mention. When each trait moves one category on the ordinal measure—shifting openness and agreeableness from 2 to 3, and conscientiousness and emotional stability from 3 to 2—the predicted probability that a legislator is liberal or somewhat liberal increases from 0.09 to 0.68, the mirror-image of the 0.68–0.09 estimates that the legislator is conservative or somewhat conservative.

Results for ideology and partisanship clearly are encouraging. Despite the fact that observed variance on the personality measures is limited, legislators' self-assessments correspond with ideology and partisanship very much as expected based on prior research involving surveys of the mass public. These findings provide confidence in the validity of the current personality data. In contrast, had the present Big Five scales failed to produce the expected effects in models of legislators' political predispositions, we would have been left on much shakier ground when moving to subsequent models concerning other aspects of legislative behavior.[18] These next models will serve as

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[18] In particular, null results would have been especially difficult to interpret because we would have no means to arbitrate between two scenarios: that personality is unrelated to the dependent variables under consideration, and that our single-item measures failed to represent meaningful differences in legislators' personalities. The positive results reported in Table 2 permit us to view the second of these scenarios as unlikely.

examples of the sorts of questions researchers could pursue with data on legislator personality. Students of legislative behavior rarely use legislator partisanship and ideology as dependent variables, and thus the case for attention to the Big Five will be most compelling if personality can be shown to influence other attitudes or behaviors.

Our final models examine the possible effects of personality on legislators' levels of progressive ambition and their perceptions of legislative tasks. Progressive ambition is measured with data from an item that asked legislators "Which best describes your future interest in politics?" Response options are "very interested in running for higher office" (coded 2), "somewhat interested in running for higher office" (1), and "not interested in running for higher office" (0). Responses were relatively evenly distributed, with 34 respondents indicating no interest in higher office, 35 claiming to be somewhat interested, and 25 very interested. Since Schlesinger (1966), numerous scholars have explored questions related to progressive ambition, often focusing on the implications of career ambition on legislative behavior (e.g., Francis & Kenny, 2000; Hall & van Houweling, 1995; Hibbing, 1986; Maestas, 2003). We focus on a different matter: whether legislators' personality traits correspond with ambition for higher office.[19] Past research on the Big Five offers little guidance, but several plausible effects are nonetheless foreseeable. Running for higher office would be a new experience, one that would require the individual to wage a public campaign, one that might necessitate a contentious battle with an opposing candidate, and one that would bring an inherent risk of electoral defeat. Given these characteristics, we envision that openness to experience, extraversion, and emotional stability all may exert positive influence on the desire to seek higher office, but also that agreeableness may lessen future ambition. Our thinking is that people rating high in openness would welcome the challenges of service in higher office, extraverts would relish the opportunity to be on the public stage, the risk of defeat would not spark anxiety among the emotionally stable, and individuals who are highly agreeable would prefer not to become embroiled in a potentially combative campaign.

Our final dependent variables concern perceptions of three legislative activities: meeting with voters and constituents, participating in committee hearings, and working on legislation. Respondents were asked how much they enjoyed each of these activities, with answers categorized using a 5-point scale that ranges from "don't enjoy at all" to "enjoy very much." Because the vast majority of respondents report enjoying these activities, we have collapsed responses on each to dichotomous form, coded 0 (respondent selected any answer other than "enjoy very much") and 1 ("enjoy very much"). For meeting with constituents, our strongest expectation is that legislators scoring high in extraversion will find the greatest enjoyment. For participating in committee hearings and working on legislation, we expect that openness to experience, which is related to cognitive engagement and information seeking (e.g., Heinstrom, 2003), will influence perceived levels of enjoyment.

Results for the final four models are reported in Table 3. Coefficients for the first model reveal two personality effects on progressive ambition: legislators high in extraversion and in emotional stability exhibit the greatest willingness to seek higher office. For both of these trait dimensions, a shift from a score of 2 to a score of 3 produces a 13-point increase in the estimated likelihood that a legislator is very interested in seeking higher office. Specifically, with other variables held constant at mean values, a male legislator's predicted probabilities of strong interest in higher office rise from 0.21 to 0.34 for extraversion and from 0.18 to 0.31 for emotional stability. We interpret these results as suggesting that potential aspects of future campaigns bear on a legislator's interest in higher office. Campaigns necessarily involve both interactions with the mass public and a risk of electoral defeat. It appears that these features of campaigns are most palatable to extraverts and the emotionally stable.

In the second model in Table 3, no predictor achieves statistical significance, and the model as a whole is also insignificant. Only the coefficient for extraversion approaches significance ($p < .12$).

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[19] For an earlier view of the possible effects of personality on political ambition, see Barber (1965).

Table 3. The Influence of Personality on the Career Ambition and Task Enjoyment of State Legislators

	Progressive Ambition	Meeting with Voters and Constituents	Participating in Committee Hearings	Working on Legislation
Gender (1 = female, 0 = male)	0.19	0.36	−0.33	1.02#
	(0.45)	(0.59)	(0.51)	(0.55)
Openness to experience (0 = low openness	0.08	−0.11	0.82*	0.88*
to 3 = high)	(0.32)	(0.43)	(0.41)	(0.41)
Conscientiousness (0 = low	−0.26	0.35	0.11	0.33
conscientiousness to 3 = high)	(0.30)	(0.49)	(0.33)	(0.35)
Extraversion (0 = low extraversion to	0.68*	0.62	0.37	0.43
3 = high)	(0.31)	(0.39)	(0.36)	(0.36)
Agreeableness (0 = low agreeableness to	−0.41	0.24	−0.35	−0.32
3 = high)	(0.40)	(0.50)	(0.45)	(0.48)
Emotional stability (0 = low emotional	0.72*	−0.47	0.54	−0.39
stability to 3 = high)	(0.36)	(0.45)	(0.41)	(0.42)
Threshold #1 (ambition); Constant	1.41	−0.04	−3.76	−1.92
(legislative activity)	(1.13)	(1.36)	(1.49)	(1.30)
Threshold #2	3.25			
	(1.18)			
Number of Cases	90	90	90	90
χ^2	11.63	4.89	10.25	12.36

Note: cell entries for progressive ambition are unstandardized ordered logistic regression coefficients and cell entries for the remaining models are unstandardized binomial logistic regression coefficients.
*$p < .05$ #$p < .10$.

In the final two models, which concern day-to-day tasks of the legislator, the expected positive effects of openness to experience are observed. A shift from a score of 2 to a score of 3 on openness produces a 21-point swing in the predicted probability that a male legislator very much enjoys participating in committee hearings (0.36 to 0.57) and an identical 21-point swing in the predicted probability that the legislator very much enjoys working on legislation (0.44–0.65).

Collectively, results in Table 3 reveal that variance in personality does influence legislators' attitudes regarding important facets of their careers. We offer these models only for illustrative purposes in an effort to establish that personality is consequential for legislative behavior. That said, present results are interesting in themselves, particularly when viewed together. The personality traits that matter for progressive ambition—extraversion and emotional stability—differ from the one that corresponds with the greatest satisfaction in legislative behavior, openness to experience. Hence, personality traits apparently combine to produce a modest disjuncture between the type of person who aspires to higher office and the type of person who will find satisfaction in the day-to-day tasks of that position.

Conclusions

For several decades, students of politics have called attention to the possible significance of the personalities of legislators. Despite these repeated—and regrettably sporadic—efforts, systematic inquiry focused on the personality traits of large numbers of legislators remains troublingly rare. At least in part, we believe that the general neglect of personality in large-N studies of elected officials, and especially in work on legislators, traces to the fact that the field has lacked a starting point, a common conceptualization of personality that could serve to unite and organize ensuing research. Absent such a common framework, scholars might agree with the intuition that personality is important, yet face uncertainty regarding how to act on that intuition given the tremendous quantity

of personality traits known to exist. In this article, we have argued that psychology's Big Five approach offers a means to overcome this uncertainty. A five-factor model focused on openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability has achieved a dominant position in trait psychology in the past two decades. In applying this framework to the study of state legislators, our objectives have been to demonstrate that it is possible to obtain information on legislators' personality traits, and that such data can be useful in efforts to understand various facets of legislative behavior.

Our empirical exercises demonstrate several basic points. First, state legislators responding to surveys will answer questions concerning personality. This, of course, establishes that it *is* possible to obtain Big Five data from a sample of legislators. Second, the data exhibit variance. Few of our respondents rated themselves as low in the Big Five traits, but it was not the case that responses were so clustered that differentiation between legislators was impossible. Third, simple validity tests yielded encouraging findings. The Big Five trait dimensions previously have been found in mass surveys to map in a particular manner to ideology and partisanship. The same patterns were observed in the present study. Fourth, information on legislators' personality traits can be illuminating. A series of simple tests illustrated that personality influences legislators' levels of interest in seeking higher office and their perceptions of basic legislative tasks.

Future research applying five-factor models in research on legislators must address two prefatory matters. The first concerns measurement. We have shown that state legislators will respond to a very brief Big Five battery. Nonetheless, uncertainty remains regarding whether elected officials will answer longer trait questionnaires and whether other legislators such as members of the U.S. Congress will answer personality items. If national legislators are reluctant to provide personality self-reports, inquiry will not necessarily be cut short. Psychologists often use third-person reports from individuals such as a person's spouse or peers as a means to validate self-report measures (e.g., Connolly, Kavanagh, & Viswesvaran, 2007; Vazire, 2006; Watson, Hubbard, & Wiese, 2000). Drawing on this same logic, it is conceivable that scholars could acquire Big Five data on legislators through third-person surveys, such as by obtaining ratings from legislative staff members or from journalists who are highly familiar with particular legislators. Such an approach could be validated by following the psychology model of comparing self-reports and third-person reports, perhaps with focus on state legislators. If third-person reports can be shown to provide valid representations of legislator personality, then such reports reasonably could be used to represent personality in those instances in which self-reports will be more difficult to acquire, such as in research on members of the U.S. House or Senate.[20]

The second matter scholars must consider is toward what ends personality data will be used. In the mass politics literature, Big Five measures have been incorporated in research on a tremendous variety of questions in the space of just a few years. We see the same potential in work on political elites. For instance, personality differences among legislators might prove consequential for aspects of career trajectory including length of tenure, movement toward leadership positions, and, as noted in the present study, progressive ambition. Numerous facets of legislative behavior also may be influenced by personality, including levels of attention to the district, sponsorship activity, party

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[20] A related matter concerns whether it might actually be desirable to obtain personality data from third persons rather than via self-reports. Self-report data are the norm in personality research. As one example, Vazire (2006) shows that 98% of the personality studies published in the *Journal of Research in Personality* in 2003 utilized self-report measures, of which 70% used only self-report measures. This finding is consistent with Kagan (2007) who showed that more than 95% of the studies in the *Journal of Personality* in 2006 used self-reports. In more recent research, Vazire (2010) finds that self-reports and informant reports vary in their relative quality depending upon which traits are being considered. Given the questions that remain regarding which approach is preferable in which circumstances, we believe it would be premature at present for scholars interested in the personalities of legislators to focus exclusively on only one form of report.

loyalty, and so on.[21] Lastly, moving beyond the individual legislator, it could be that the collective traits possessed by members of committees influence matters such as patterns in committee activity.[22] Or, viewing an entire institution longitudinally, one could consider whether the distribution of traits among legislators influences phenomena such as levels of institutional civility (e.g., Dodd & Schraufnagel, 2009; Uslaner, 1994).

Our primary focus in this study has been on the personalities of legislators. However, it warrants reiteration that prior scholars have conducted survey-based research regarding the personalities of other political elites, including judges (Gibson, 1981) and members of city councils (Wiegele & Oots, 1990). Future research in these areas applying a five-factor framework could prove insightful. For instance, scholars might examine whether personality traits predict phenomena such as judicial ideology, the likelihood of being overturned by an appellate court, questioning style during oral arguments, and so on.

These examples are offered only to demonstrate the potential utility of attention to personality in research on legislators and other political elites, not to suggest that other targets of inquiry will be less promising. At this early stage in social and political applications of the Big Five, we believe it would be imprudent to foreclose any research avenues. Five-factor models of trait structure have yielded a great wealth of insights when introduced in applied research on a considerable variety of questions by scholars in a diverse array of fields. Although similar use of these frameworks in research on politics is only now becoming common, the early returns from such studies have been quite encouraging. Collectively, the experiences of scholars who have incorporated Big Five data in applied research suggest that scholars interested in legislators and other political elites now face an important opportunity. With systematic attention to the possible significance of personality, we have the potential to improve our understanding of numerous facets of elite political behavior.

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[21] For both career trajectory and legislative behavior, considerable guidance on possible personality effects can be found in research in psychology regarding the impact of personality on behavior in the workplace (for a review, see Barrick & Mount, 1991).

[22] For examples of research on personality and behavior in organizations, see Organ (1994) and Organ and McFall (2004). One study of possible relevance for research on congressional committees found that the traits of jurors affect jury performance (Clark, Boccaccini, Caillouet, & Chaplin, 2007).

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