

Christopher D. Johnston, Howard G. Lavine, and Christopher M. Federico, *Open versus Closed: Personality, Identity, and the Politics of Redistribution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 282 pages. ISBN: 9781107546424. Paperback \$29.99.

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Why do people hold opinions on economic issues that run counter to their interests? For some time, this has been a question of interest to both U.S. politics scholars and the pundit class. The question is particularly relevant in the context of the current administration. Despite (at times) populist rhetoric, Donald Trump has pursued a traditionally conservative economic agenda — lowering taxes, cutting social welfare spending, deregulation, and the like. Yet members of the white working class, who stand to benefit the least from these policies, continue to make up his base of support. Much of his opposition, meanwhile, comes from upper- and upper-middle-class professionals, many of whom stand to gain from his agenda. In *Open versus Closed: Personality, Identity, and the Politics of Redistribution*, Christopher D. Johnston, Howard G. Lavine, and Christopher M. Federico seek to explain this apparent disregard for self-interest. They do so through a novel and well-supported theoretical argument that connects insights from personality psychology with political science research on partisanship and elite cue taking.

The focus of their work is *dispositional openness* (p. 11), which they conceptualize as a broad personality trait tapping into how people tolerate and respond to threat and uncertainty. Coarsely, “open” individuals are tolerant of uncertainty and willing to take risks, while “closed” individuals seek out stability and security (p. 7). By defining “openness” broadly, the authors can speak to a variety of more specific personality constructs, such as authoritarianism, need for closure, the “Big Five” openness to experience trait, and others. This is a strength. Personality psychology plays host to a litany of overlapping strands of research, which can harm the overall generalizability and progression of findings from the field. By drawing on multiple constructs related to openness while not dismissing important differences between them, the authors both speak

to a wide array of personality scholars and connect the concept of openness in a relatable way to the general interests of those studying (or simply interested in) U.S. political behavior.

Extant research suggests that personality has little to no effect on opinion concerning economic issues. However, Johnston, Lavine, and Federico contend this is because extant research studies the *overall* relationship between personality and opinion, thus not accounting for mitigating factors. In contrast, the authors argue that, conditional on one’s level of political engagement, dispositional openness *does* have a strong impact on economic opinion. For unengaged individuals, openness has a direct and instrumental effect. According to Johnston, Lavine, and Federico, more open individuals tolerate risks associated with the free market (and thus have conservative economic opinions), while more closed individuals prefer the stability that regulations and social welfare can provide (and thus have liberal economic opinions).

For those engaged in the political process, however, forming economic opinions is about identity expression, not instrumental concerns. Engaged individuals, the authors argue, latch onto partisan and ideological labels with which they have the most “cultural affinity” based on their personality type (p. 9). They then follow partisan cues, as well as explicit cultural signals from elites, to form an opinion on economic issues that matches their expressive identity. The result is a reversal from what one sees with unengaged citizens. Engaged individuals high in openness take liberal policy positions, and those low in openness take conservative positions. The authors argue that this is why working-class individuals, if they are “closed” and engaged in the political process, support the Republican economic agenda.

Johnston, Lavine, and Federico thoroughly and convincingly provide a wealth of empirical support for their argument. Using a variety of survey data sets representative of the U.S. public ranging from 1992 to 2012, they consistently establish that the effect of personality on economic opinion hinges on one’s level of political engagement. For the engaged, this statistically significant effect is quite strong, rivaling or surpassing the effect of race, income level, employment status, and other factors that previous research prioritizes. This result, moreover, holds up across time, across specific measures of openness, and across respondents’ level of income. It also holds up for a variety of economic issue questions. Some of the questions the authors look at deal with complex policies, but many are “easy” questions for

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which the respondents' material interest is quite clear. Thus, the authors contend, the lack of self-interested economic opinion formation is not due to *ignorance* of the issues. Rather, it is due to people's *motivation*, when engaged in the political process, to follow their personality-informed political identity.

The authors also work through the mechanisms by which personality differentially effects opinion based on one's level of engagement. Using, again, a large span of nationally representative data sets, they first demonstrate that dispositional openness (conditional on political engagement) has a significant effect on the partisan and ideological labels with which one identifies, as well as the hue of the media one follows. From there, Johnston, Lavine, and Federico turn to a series of survey experiments to demonstrate that engaged individuals use elite cues to match their opinion on economic matters to their personality and identity. Ironically, they show that engaged individuals — those who, according to public opinion scholars, are most entrenched in their beliefs — can be easily and dramatically influenced one way or the other by elite cues. Those unengaged in the political process, however, are less susceptible, and their economic opinions are directly and stably informed by their personality type.

While working through a litany of data sets, tests, and measures, the authors do well to discuss and present their results in a clear, cogent way. Methodological details that are important, but may bog down their writing, are left in an appendix. In addition, a strength of the empirical results presented in *Open versus Closed* is the attention to external validity. Political psychologists often conduct experiments on MTurk workers, students, or other convenience samples. As such, some have suggested this research is insufficiently generalizable. This may not be a fair accusation or as serious a problem as critics assert. However, if scholars are interested in how effects are conditional based on some moderating variable in a population (e.g., demographics, partisanship, or, in this case, political engagement), a sample that is representative of, or at least reflects, that variation is necessary. Therefore, the bulk of Johnston, Lavine, and Federico's analysis focuses on nationally representative surveys. Even their experimental work is conducted on surveys that are at least reflective of the heterogeneity in the U.S. population. This allows the authors to speak confidently on how personality impacts economic attitude formation for the public writ large.

While Johnston, Lavine, and Federico make a convincing argument, they do leave a few questions unanswered. Some of these points the authors themselves highlight, such as the need for study beyond the United States. They also highlight the possibility of personality survey items not being completely exogenous to one's political preferences (a potential issue for all personality studies), and they call for continued research to improve commonly used measures. Another avenue for future research, one to which they give less discussion, is what exactly makes up the "cultural affinity" that attracts different personality types to different partisan and ideological labels (p. 9). As the link between personality and both partisanship and ideology, cultural affinity is presented in the book in a few different, albeit interconnected, ways. At times, cultural affinity is a social-identity-based commitment to one's party or self-identified ideology (p. 48), at times it refers to "cultural and lifestyle orientations" (p. 51), and at times it refers to agreement on culture-based issues such as abortion or gay rights (p. 53). Moreover, counter to recent research pointing to race as a driver of partisan identification and opinion formation, Johnston, Lavine, and Federico argue that race is just one part of "a more general cluster of cultural attitudes" connecting personality, partisanship, and economic opinion (p. 241). But could racial animus be the primary mechanism connecting dispositional openness and partisan/ideological attachment, thus influencing attitudes on *both* cultural and economic issues? The results presented cannot rule out this possibility. This is not a fatal flaw (one project can only do so much), but it does point to the need for future study on the specific mechanisms connecting personality and partisan attachment.

The book is valuable for paying close attention to the role of engagement as a moderating factor for political behavior. In this vein, it connects to a long line of public opinion research showing that engagement, normatively, is a dual-edged sword. There is no democracy without engagement from citizens. But engagement causes one to listen only to confirming information, engage in motivated reasoning to maintain cognitive consistency, and display intolerance or outright hostility to opposing group identities and perspectives. With this book, we also find that engagement causes one to ignore material self-interest on economic matters in favor of expressing an (elite-created) cultural identity. It would be better for citizens to rationally form opinions as based on their self-interest (ideally, many would assert that citizens should form reasoned opinions based

on higher principles of liberty, justice, etc., but that is another matter). As Johnston, Lavine, and Federico demonstrate, though, it appears those tuned out of politics are the ones most able to do so.

The authors position *Open versus Closed* as an effort to create “a political psychology true to its name” (p. 245). Indeed, they should be commended for developing and defending an argument that pays close attention *both* to psychological disposition and political/contextual factors. The book would thus be informative for scholars of political personality and psychology as well as those interested in U.S. politics more broadly. It would also fit in the syllabus for a graduate or advanced undergraduate course in political behavior, regardless of whether the course focused on the U.S. context.

References

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