

Are extroverts more Eurosceptic? How personalities shape attitudes toward the EU

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What determines the attitudes of citizens toward the EU? Based on a recent study, [Bert Bakker](#) assesses the impact that different types of personality have on EU attitudes. He finds that when survey evidence is compared, there is a clear link between different traits, such as extroversion and agreeableness, and views on the EU.



Citizens differ profoundly in their attitudes toward the European Union. It is important to understand the roots of these attitudes as they influence citizens' vote choice in elections for the European parliament, EU referendums, and national elections. Previous research has suggested that socio-economic status, political knowledge, views on immigration, the nature of an individual's identity, and evaluations of the government and the economy can shape EU attitudes. Yet, we still do not fully understand why attitudes toward the EU differ among citizens.

In a [recent study](#), conducted with my co-author [Claes de Vreese](#), we assess whether citizens' personality traits are associated with their attitudes toward the EU. In doing so we draw upon the so-called 'big five model' of personality. This model isolates an individual's traits using five factors: their openness to experience, and their levels of conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness and neuroticism. These five traits are partly inherited and remain relatively stable in adulthood. As such they are often viewed as core characteristics that shape the attitudes and behaviour of citizens. In the domain of politics, previous studies have shown that personality is associated with [voting behaviour](#) as well as the [behaviour of politicians in parliament](#).

But how can we measure personality and EU attitudes? In the period leading up to the 2014 European Parliament election, a large sample of Dutch citizens participated in a series of surveys. In one of these surveys, personality was measured by asking participants to indicate how well certain statements characterised their personality. For instance, neuroticism was measured using items such as "I am upset easily", with participants answering on a scale ranging from "totally agree" (1) through to "totally disagree" (7). If you are curious about your own personality, the test can still be taken [online](#). But along with their personality, citizens were also asked to indicate their agreement with a series of questions about the EU, which allows us to measure how personalities influence EU attitudes.

Personality traits and attitudes toward the EU

Citizens that score highly on openness to experience might be expected to have more tolerance toward immigrants and be curious about other cultures. Our findings suggest that there is some evidence that such individuals are more supportive of expanding the EU. On average, they have a more positive view toward the accession of new member states such as Iceland, Montenegro and Turkey.

Agreeable citizens, on the other hand, may be expected to be more trusting and caring, while less agreeable citizens would be viewed as more distrusting and self-centred. Our findings indicate that less agreeable citizens tend to be more likely to [support politicians](#) that clearly distinguish themselves from the political establishment. Moreover, highly agreeable citizens display a higher level of tolerance toward members of other cultures and groups. We find that highly agreeable citizens also tend to be supportive of expanding the EU. Yet, contrary to what might be expected, agreeableness was not associated with a tendency to trust the EU's institutions.

Neuroticism, in the broadest sense, captures the tendency to experience negative emotions such as anger and fear as well as feelings of insecurity and self-consciousness. Previous studies have found that neurotic citizens were

more supportive of policies that could accommodate the insecurities that they experience – such as the redistribution of income. Along these lines, we find that neurotic citizens are supportive of expanding the EU by allowing new member states, as well as deepening the EU by unifying and strengthening the existing cooperation. Perhaps EU integration accommodates some of the insecurities such citizens experience from globalisation and economic crises. Yet, neurotic citizens at the same time also experience negative views concerning the EU overall, which suggests that the EU is also a source of stress in its own right for such individuals.

Finally, conscientious citizens, broadly characterised as being dutiful, structured and self-disciplined, might be expected to oppose a change in the political status quo, and thereby be less supportive of further expansion and integration within the EU. Yet we found such citizens were generally more supportive of integration, which suggests they may nevertheless support the EU as a means to achieving wider goals.

What do these findings mean for our understanding of EU attitudes? Our study shows that EU attitudes are – at least to some extent – associated with individual differences in personality. The associations are generally small to modest compared with other more proximal antecedents of EU attitudes such as government evaluations and anti-immigrant attitudes. But personality should be regarded as another factor in helping us to understand why some citizens are supportive of the EU while others are less supportive.

This presents an opportunity for politicians and policymakers to use the role of personalities in shaping attitudes to tailor their message to the psychological needs of their audience. In doing so, it may be possible to more effectively articulate a particular message on the nature of European integration to the public. And in the long-run, this may be one step toward increasing the legitimacy of the EU.

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About the author

Bert Bakker – University of Amsterdam

[Bert Bakker](#) is Assistant Professor of Political Communication and Journalism at the University of Amsterdam.

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