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Inconsistent and very weak evidence for a direct association between childhood personality and adult ideology

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Abstract

Objective: We add depth and breadth to the study of the childhood personality–adult ideology link with additional data, measures, and measurement approaches.

Background: Past research in (political) psychology has put forward that individual differences in psychological needs shape ideology. Most evidence supporting this claim is cross-sectional. Two previous longitudinal studies showed preliminary evidence that childhood personality traits linked to negativity bias correlate with political ideology in adulthood, yet these studies have limitations.

Methods: We report the results from two longitudinal studies (combined $N = 13{,}822$) conducted in the United Kingdom that measure childhood personality (5–11 years old) and political ideology from puberty (age 16) to early (age 26) and middle adulthood (age 42).

Results: We find very weak and inconsistent evidence that childhood personality traits related to negativity bias are directly associated with general conservatism, social conservatism, or economic conservatism across different stages of adulthood. Across the board, Bayes Factors most often indicate strong evidence for the null hypothesis.

Conclusion: We offer evidence that the results of previous research are not as robust or as consistent as scholars in the extant literature presume. Our findings call for more, not less, research on the link between childhood personality and political ideology.

KEYWORDS

childhood personality, conservatism, ideological asymmetry, political ideology

1 | INTRODUCTION

What explains the stark differences between liberals and conservatives? A prominent perspective in (political) psychology contends that individual differences in psychological needs shape the formation of political ideology and create an asymmetry between liberals and conservatives with respect to personality traits. In particular, individuals who prefer structure, order, and who are more sensitive to negative stimuli—such as having a heightened negativity bias—find solace and comfort in conservative approaches to politics (Hibbing et al., 2014; Jost et al., 2009). If this

is the case, scholars argue (e.g., Hibbing et al., 2013; Jost et al., 2009), then it has consequential political implications: To the extent that ideological differences are tied to stable and deep-seated individual differences in personality traits, it implies that conflict between liberals and conservatives would be difficult to mitigate through mutual understanding and compromise. Moreover, this scientific perspective has had a public impact by influencing how political observers (e.g., Maddow, 2020; Melber, 2021) and the news media (e.g., Brueck, 2018; Resnick, 2017) discuss the causes of political polarization.

The vast majority of the evidence supporting this claim, however, comes from cross-sectional research with adult subjects in which self-reported personality traits are correlated with self-reported ideology (Federico & Malka, 2018). Because cross-sectional correlations do not provide sufficient support for causal relationships, scholars look to panel studies that follow individuals from childhood to adulthood as offering a stronger basis for the relationship between personality traits on political attitudes (e.g., Hibbing et al., 2014; Jost et al., 2009; Reifen-Tagar & Cimpian, 2022). These researchers reason that because personality traits emerge early in childhood, if adults' political attitudes correlate with their personality traits as children, it would constitute evidence that psychological predispositions play an important role in shaping political attitudes (e.g., Hibbing et al., 2014; Jost et al., 2009).

To date, three studies using two longitudinal samples in one context (the United States) have tested whether there is continuity between childhood personality and adult ideology. First, Block and Block (2006) assessed the personality of 95 children from two different nursery schools in the San Francisco Bay Area at age three or four and their ideology at age 23. They found that, as children, conservative men were more likely to be characterized by their nursery school teachers as visibly deviant, easily offended, anxious when confronted by uncertainties, distrustful of others, and feeling unworthy and guilty. Likewise, as children, conservative women were more likely to be described by their teachers as inhibited, easily victimized, indecisive, shy, compliant, anxious when confronted by ambiguity, and fearful. Block and Block (2006, p. 12) conclude that adults with a conservative ideology were viewed "as uncomfortable with uncertainty, as susceptible to a sense of guilt, and as rigidifying when experiencing duress" in childhood.

Following Block and Block (2006), Fraley et al. (2012) and Wegemer and Vandell (2020) used the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development study in the United States to study this question. This survey measured childhood temperament when respondents were 54 months old using the Children's Behavior Questionnaire and ideology at age 18 (Fraley et al., 2012, $N = 659$) and 26 (Wegemer & Vandell, 2020, raw $N = 814$, with imputed values by the authors, $N = 1364$). Fraley et al. (2012) and Wegemer and Vandell (2020) found that children who had difficulty paying attention, who had lower levels of activity or restlessness and who had higher levels of fearfulness were more likely to be conservative at age 18 (Fraley et al., 2012) and 26 (Wegemer & Vandell, 2020). These scholars interpreted their results as being consistent with those of Block and Block (2006).

Taken together, these three studies suggest that conservatives in adulthood were more likely to be characterized by their caregivers as feeling easily victimized, easily offended, fearful, rigid, and anxious during childhood. Yet, as we explain in the next section, there are both empirical and theoretical reasons to be skeptical that these studies constitute robust and consistent evidence that childhood personality causes adults to adopt a particular political ideology. The contribution of our study is to add depth and breadth to the study of the childhood personality–adult ideology link with additional data, measures, and measurement approaches. Across a host of analyses, we do not find a consistent relationship between childhood personality and adult ideology measured at different stages in adulthood. These results call for more nuanced explanations for how and when childhood personality traits could shape how people form their political ideologies in adulthood.

1.1 | Is there a childhood personality–adult ideology link?

Because personality traits tend to form early in childhood and remain stable across one's life, a person's childhood temperament could offer a window into the political opinions they adopt as an adult (Landau-Wells & Saxe, 2020; Reifen-Tagar & Cimpian, 2022). For instance, a child who becomes anxious when exposed to new experiences and maintains this trait throughout childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood may choose to avoid novel situations as well as find comfort in familiar traditional social arrangements. As this person develops political ideologies in early to middle adulthood, conservative views about the social order may resonate more on a psychological level than liberal views (Hibbing et al., 2014; Jost et al., 2009). Note that from a theoretical standpoint a direct link between childhood personality and adult ideology need only be probabilistic. It need not be the case that *everyone's* childhood personality traits predict their political ideology as an adult. As Hibbing et al. (2014, p. 304, emphasis added) explain, "infants with stronger negativity biases

are *more likely* to grow up to become political conservatives." These scholars along with Amodio et al. (2007), Van Bavel and Pereira (2018), Mondak (2010) and Janoff-Bulman and Carnes (2013), to name a few, point to the research of Block and Block (2006) and Fraley et al. (2012) as offering strong evidence for this claim.[1]

On the one hand, we believe that this theoretical claim is plausible, and if true, it would offer compelling evidence for the causal interpretation that scholars lend to cross-sectional correlations between self-reported personality traits and political attitudes in adult samples. On the other hand, recent research suggests that the relationship between personality traits and political attitudes is more complex and conditional than this theoretical model implies (e.g., Bakker et al., 2021), and moreover, we do not find the evidence provided by Block and Block (2006), Fraley et al. (2012) and Wegemer and Vandell (2020) to be as compelling as proponents of the childhood personality–adult ideology link describe them to be. Here we outline a series of methodological and theoretical reasons that lead us to question whether these studies offer strong evidence for a direct link between childhood personality and adult ideology.

First, from a methodological standpoint, out of the 200 correlations coefficients reported by Block and Block (2006), only 42 (21%) were statistically significant at $p < 0.1$.[2] Moreover, many of the traits that did not show a statistically significant correlation with ideology are nonetheless conceptually similar to the traits that were significantly correlated with adult ideology. As such, Block and Block's (2006, p. 6) conclusion that the correlations between childhood personality and adult ideology are "surprisingly numerous and coherent" is not supported by the empirical evidence.

Second, the study design of Block and Block (2006) is not adequately powered to detect small associations between childhood personality and adult ideology. The sample size of Block and Block (2006) is 95, and the minimum population-based effect size that could reliably (power of 0.8) yield a statistically significant correlation ($\alpha = 0.05$) given a sample size of 95 respondents is $r = 0.279$. This effect size is much larger than the correlation one would expect between childhood personality and adult ideology in the population because: (1) the correlation between childhood personality and adult behavior, in other fields, are modest at best (Shiner et al., 2003), and (2) $r = 0.275$ is almost two times larger than the meta-analytic correlations reported in the personality-politics literature among adults (Osborne et al., 2018).[3]

Third, Block and Block (2006) treat ideology as a one-dimensional construct ranging from liberalism to conservatism. In Western contexts, ideology is, however, multidimensional and consists of a social and an economic dimension (Malka et al., 2019). Adult personality is consistently correlated with social conservatism but less consistently, or deferentially, correlated with economic conservatism (Federico & Malka, 2018; Malka et al., 2014). While Wegemer and Vandell (2020) used a single-item liberal-conservatism measure, the other two studies created a liberal-conservatism composite out of self-reported policy preferences tapping into social policy preferences as well as items tapping into economic policy preferences.[4] In doing so, these studies could not detect heterogeneity in the personality–ideology relationship that often appears when treating ideology as a multidimensional construct.

Fourth, all three studies measure ideology in early adulthood (ages 18 and 26), which is a period when parental and childhood influences on politics are stronger compared with middle adulthood and beyond (Hatemi et al., 2009). Panel studies show that people tend to form their political identities in their mid-20s (Niemi & Jennings, 1991) and political attitudes become more crystallized and stable once people reach 30 years of age (Sears & Funk, 1999). Consequently, it is possible that a correlation between childhood personality traits at political attitudes at age 18 or 26 reflects the continued influence of one's childhood environment. At the very least, it suggests that researchers should explore whether a correlation between childhood personality traits and political ideology remains past the age of 30.

Fifth, another way in which these studies offer a narrow empirical basis for the general claim that childhood personality shapes adult ideology is they rely on two samples conducted in the United States. Yet, context could condition the association between personality and ideology (Malka et al., 2014).

Finally, from a theoretical perspective, it seems unlikely for there to be a strong zero-order, unmediated or un-moderated association between childhood personality and adult ideology as put forward in these studies. If personality traits shape political attitudes, it most likely depends on the presence of other triggers (De Neve, 2015). To understand why people with similar personalities do different things, we need to understand the mechanisms that link distal causes to ultimate effects (Elster, 1999). Without specifying and measuring the mechanisms that connect childhood personality traits to adult political ideology as well as the conditions that trigger them, we would expect very small zero-order associations between the two at best.

To summarize, the current study deepens and broadens the literature on childhood personality and adult ideology. We deepen this literature by conducting two well-powered studies probing the empirical basis of the childhood personality–adult ideology link. We broaden this literature by: (1) treating ideology as multidimensional; (2) studying the association between childhood

personality and ideology in early adulthood as well as middle adulthood; and (3) drawing on evidence collected outside the United States in a similar but different cultural context (United Kingdom). To do this, we test three preregistered hypotheses derived from the negativity bias literature linking childhood negativity bias to adult conservatism (Hibbing et al., 2014) as well as the specific findings by Block and Block (2006) and Fraley et al. (2012). Specifically, we hypothesize that negative childhood traits (i.e., childhood restlessness, fidgetiness, willingness to fight, worries, solitary, irritability, miserableness, disobedience) are positively associated with conservatism (*H1*), social conservatism (*H2*), and economic conservatism (*H3*).

2 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 | Samples

The NCDS follows *all* 17,415 individuals born in England, Scotland, and Wales in a single week of 1958 (Power & Elliott, 2005). Following the initial assessment at birth, respondents were reassessed at ages 7, 11, and 16 using a parental interview and at ages 23, 33, and 42 with an interview conducted by a professional survey research interviewer. Childhood personality was measured at age 7 and age 11, while ideology was measured at age 41–42 (between November 1999 and May 2000). Due to attrition and missing data, the final sample of the NCDS for age 7 was 9220, and the final sample for age 11 was 8756, while the non-response rate was 34.4% by the time respondents turned 41/42 years old.

Like the NCDS, the BCS70 follows the lives of all 17,198 individuals born in England, Scotland, and Wales in a single week of 1970 (Elliott & Shepherd, 2006). Childhood personality for the BCS70 was measured at age 5 and age 10 by the children's parents. Ideology, on the other hand, was measured at age 16 (March 1986–September 1986), age 26 (April 1996–September 1996), and age 42 or 43 (May 2012 to April 2013) in face-to-face interviews. Due to attrition and missing data, the final sample size for the BCS70 was 4340 for age 5, 4602 for age 10, 4588 for age 16, and 7274 at age 26. For the BCS70, the non-response rate was 8.4 percentage points higher than the NCDS (42.8%) by the time respondents turned 42/43 years old.

2.2 | Power analysis

An a priori power analysis (GPower version 3.1.9.4) showed that the minimum sample size needed to detect a small effect (power level of 0.95, α-level of 0.05, and a small effect size of $f = 0.1$) is 2368. We set power to 0.95 because this allows us to reliably detect small population-based effects. As a consequence, the sample sizes for both the BCS70 (and NCDS) are able to reliably detect a small association between childhood personality and adult ideology (see preregistration document for details).

2.3 | Preregistration

First, we analyzed the data from the 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS). Based on the results from the NCDS, we preregistered the hypotheses, design, and planned analyses for the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70) for the association between childhood personality and adult ideology at age 42 on the Open Science Framework—https://tinyurl.com/49n8tv3n—on April 27, 2020, before we got access to the data. After we got access the BCS70, we learned that ideology was also measured at age 16 and 26. As we already had downloaded the data, we did not preregister the analyses for ideology at age 16 and 26 but follow all criteria outlined in our pre-analysis plan.

2.4 | Deviations from preregistration

We deviated from our preregistration in a few ways. First, a question about young people respecting traditional values was not present in the BCS70 data, so an alternative question about abortion was used instead. Our results do not change if we exclude the abortion item from the analyses. Second, we preregistered that separate models would be run if the correlation between personality traits was greater than 0.5. There was only one such case: the correlation between restlessness and fidgety was $r = 0.506$ in the BCS70 (at age 10). However, we decided to include both restlessness and fidgety in one model because the Variance Inflation Factors for models that include both restlessness and fidgety are small (less than 1.5 for every dependent variable), and results do not change following the preregistered analysis strategy. Third, we preregistered a one-sided test with an alpha level of $p < 0.05$, but we present the more conservative two-sided tests with the same alpha level. Fourth, we preregistered controlling for education, but our models do not for two reasons: (a) neither Block and Block (2006), Fraley et al. (2012), nor Wegemer and Vandell (2020) control for education and (b) concerns of endogeneity: childhood personality causes education and ideology (Wysocki et al., 2022). Finally, the latent negativity models were not preregistered.

2.5 | Childhood personality in the NCDS and BCS70

In both samples we rely on a subset of the Rutter Children's Behavior Questionnaire (Rutter, 1967), which evaluates children's behavior and was completed by the kids' parents. Our measures are reliable and valid indicators of childhood personality traits (Rutter, 1967) and have acceptable criterion validity in other domains (e.g., Daly et al., 2016; Eduardo & Ildefonso, 2020). In both the NCDS and BCS70, we rely on the eight childhood personality traits present in the NCDS: fidgety, fights, worries, solitary, irritable, miserable, disobedient, and afraid of new situations (link to full survey). In addition, the BCS70 included restlessness, which was negatively correlated with adult ideology (Fraley et al., 2012), as an additional childhood personality trait on the BCS70 (link to age 5 survey and link to age 10 survey). Table 1 shows the childhood personality measures in the NCDS (third column) and BCS70 (most right-hand column) are conceptually similar to those that correlated with conservatism in Block and Block (2006, most left-hand column of the table) and in Fraley et al. (2012); Wegemer and Vandell (2020, second column from the left).

For both waves of the NCDS and for 5-year-old children in the BCS70, the children were scored by one of their parents on a 3-point scale (1 = *Never*, 2 = *Sometimes*, 3 = *Frequently*). At age 10 of the BCS70, the personality traits were scored on a 101-point scale, which allowed for much greater variability. In order to make these two different scales comparable, we standardized the childhood traits. The descriptive statistics can be found in Supplement S.1, Tables S1–S8, the item wording can be found in Supplement S.2.

Our preregistered analysis strategy follows Block and Block (2006) by treating each item as a separate indicator of childhood personality. Nonetheless, we also created a latent "childhood negativity" indicator which combines the responses to the eight (NCDS) to nine (BCS70) items into one average "childhood negativity" score. Factor analyses suggest that a one-dimensional construct is the best fitting factor structure for our data as the two different datasets at both time points show only one factor with eigenvalues greater than 1. Furthermore, the three common model fit indices for factor analysis (RMSEA, CFI, and TLI) are largely identical between the one-dimensional and two-dimensional factor analyses (all results can be derived from the replication file).

TABLE 1 Overview of personality measurements used across studies.

Block and Block (2006)	Fraley et al. (2012)††	NCDS study (age 42)	BCS70 study (age 16/26/42)
Shy and reserved (0.37)† Keeps thoughts to self (0.38)† Likes to be by him/herself (0.24)† Prefers non-verbal communication (0.37)†	Shyness (−0.06)	Afraid new things (−0.01) Solitary (−0.02)*	Afraid new things (0.01/0.02/0.01) Solitary (−0.02/−0.05*/−0.05*)
Is visibly deviant from peers (0.37)‡ Indecisive and vacillating (0.46)† Is obedient and compliant (0.34)† Looks to adults for help and direction (0.26)†	Attentional focusing (−0.14)*	Disobedient (0.01) Fights (0.01)	Disobedient (0.03/−0.01/−0.02) Fights (0.03/0.01/−0.01)
	Restlessness (0.00)	Fidgety (−0.01)	Restlessness (0.04/0.04/0.04)* Fidgety (−0.01/−0.02/−0.01)
Anxious (0.30)‡ Immobilized under stress (0.27)‡ Tends to brood and ruminate (0.29)‡ Distrustful of others (0.30)‡	Fear (0.04)	Afraid new things (−0.01) Worries often (−0.02)	Afraid new things (0.01/0.02/0.01) Worries often (0.01/0.01/−0.03)
Cries easily (0.24)† Is easily offended (0.25)‡ Readiness to feel guilty (0.24)†		Irritable (−0.02) Miserable (−0.01)	Irritable (−0.01/−0.01/−0.04) Miserable (−0.03/0.01/0.03)

Note: We report the concepts measured in the different studies and the bivariate correlations with conservatism in the parentheses.

*$p < 0.05$ (two-sided) for whole sample.

†$p < 0.1$ for girls.

‡$p < 0.1$ for boys. NCDS and BCS70 results based on age 10 results. For the BCS70 we reported results for age 16, age 26, and age 42 in parentheses in the following way ([age 16]/[age 26]/[age 42]). Block and Block (2006) measured personality at age 3; Fraley et al. (2012) at 54 months.

††Wegemer and Vandell (2020) used the same measures as Fraley et al. (2012).

2.6 | Adult ideology in the NCDS and BCS70

2.6.1 | Ideology at age 42 in the NCDS and BCS70

We constructed an index of social conservatism using five questions. For the NCDS, these questions are about traditional values, the environment (two questions), law and order, and the death penalty. The BCS70 used three identical questions as the NCDS (the death penalty question and two environment questions), and one nearly identical question about law and order; however, as it did not have a question about "traditional values," a question about abortion was included instead. All questions were measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). The five questions were recoded, combined, and standardized—an approach we use for all ideology dimensions. It should be noted that the standardized factor loadings of the environmental issues were lower compared to the other three items (see Supplement S.3, Table S9). Reanalyzing the data without these two items, the results remain consistent both statistically and substantively. Here, we follow the preregistration document and include all five items in our study. To save space, results without the environmental issues can be derived from the replication file.

We measured economic conservatism using three questions tapping into the redistribution of wealth, income inequality, and support for big business and measured in both studies on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). The measures of social conservatism and economic conservatism have sufficient variation and show acceptable psychometric properties (see Supplement S.3 for model fit indices (RMSEA, CFI, SRMR) and standardized factor loadings (Table S9). Finally, like Block and Block (2006) and Fraley et al. (2012), we also combine our measures into an indicator of general conservatism. The measures of ideology at age 16 and age 26 in the BCS70 very closely follow the BCS70 at age 42 with a few deviations.

Participants in the BCS70 reported their social and economic conservatism at age 16, age 26 and age 42. We find positive correlations between the different measures of conservatism (age 16–age 26: $r=0.29$; age 16–age 42: $r=0.20$; age 26–age 42: $r=0.46$), social conservatism (age 16–age 26: $r=0.33$; age 16–age 42: $r=0.23$; age 26–age 42: $r=0.47$) and economic conservatism (age 16–age 26: $r=0.14$; age 16–age 42: $r=0.1$; age 26–age 42: $r=0.39$). These positive and statistically significant associations provide evidence that ideology is, especially in adulthood, at least to some extent stable over time something that aligns with other research on the stability of ideology (Ansolabehere et al., 2008; Freeze & Montgomery, 2016; Niemi & Jennings, 1991; Sears & Funk, 1999; Wattenberg, 2019).

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | The association between childhood personality and adult ideology

Following Fraley et al. (2012) and Wegemer and Vandell (2020) and as preregistered, we ran OLS regressions with general conservatism, social, and economic conservatism as dependent variables and the personality indicators as the independent variables.[5] We report standardized coefficients in Figure 1 (general conservatism), Figure 2 (social conservatism), and Figure 3 (economic conservatism), where the dots are point estimates and the bars the 95 percent confidence intervals. For tables with the full regression output, see Tables S10–S14. Block and Block (2006) and Fraley et al. (2012) also present bivariate correlations between childhood traits and adult ideology. This analytical approach leads to substantively similar conclusions. To save space, these results are presented in Supplement S.4, Figures S1 and S2.

Starting with the NCDS (rightmost panel of Figure 1), none of the eight personality traits measured at age 7 showed a statistically significant association with adult conservatism, and only one of the eight personality traits measured at age 11 was associated with adult ideology—childhood solitude. However, the association was in the unexpected direction: liberals—not conservatives—were more solitary at age 11. Using the latent negativity dimension (bottom panel of Figure 1), the results remain inconsistent in terms of the direction of the association: three positive associations and four negative, while one is essentially zero. It is important to note that all associations (statistically significant or not) are very weak: all effects are smaller than a standardized association of 0.05: this means that a one standard deviation change in childhood personality correlates with a 0.05 standard deviation change in conservatism, suggesting that these effects have no, to very limited, substantive meaning.

Turning to our preregistered tests in the BCS70 (second panel from the right of Figure 1), only one of the nine childhood personality traits—childhood restlessness—at age 5 showed a statistically significant but very weak association with adult ideology ($\beta=0.05$, $p=0.004$), but this association was not statically significant for childhood restlessness at age 10 and adult conservatism at age 42. Likewise, childhood solitude at age 10 ($\beta=-0.05$, $p<0.001$) was—contrary to the preregistered expectation—negatively associated with conservatism at age 42, but solitude at age

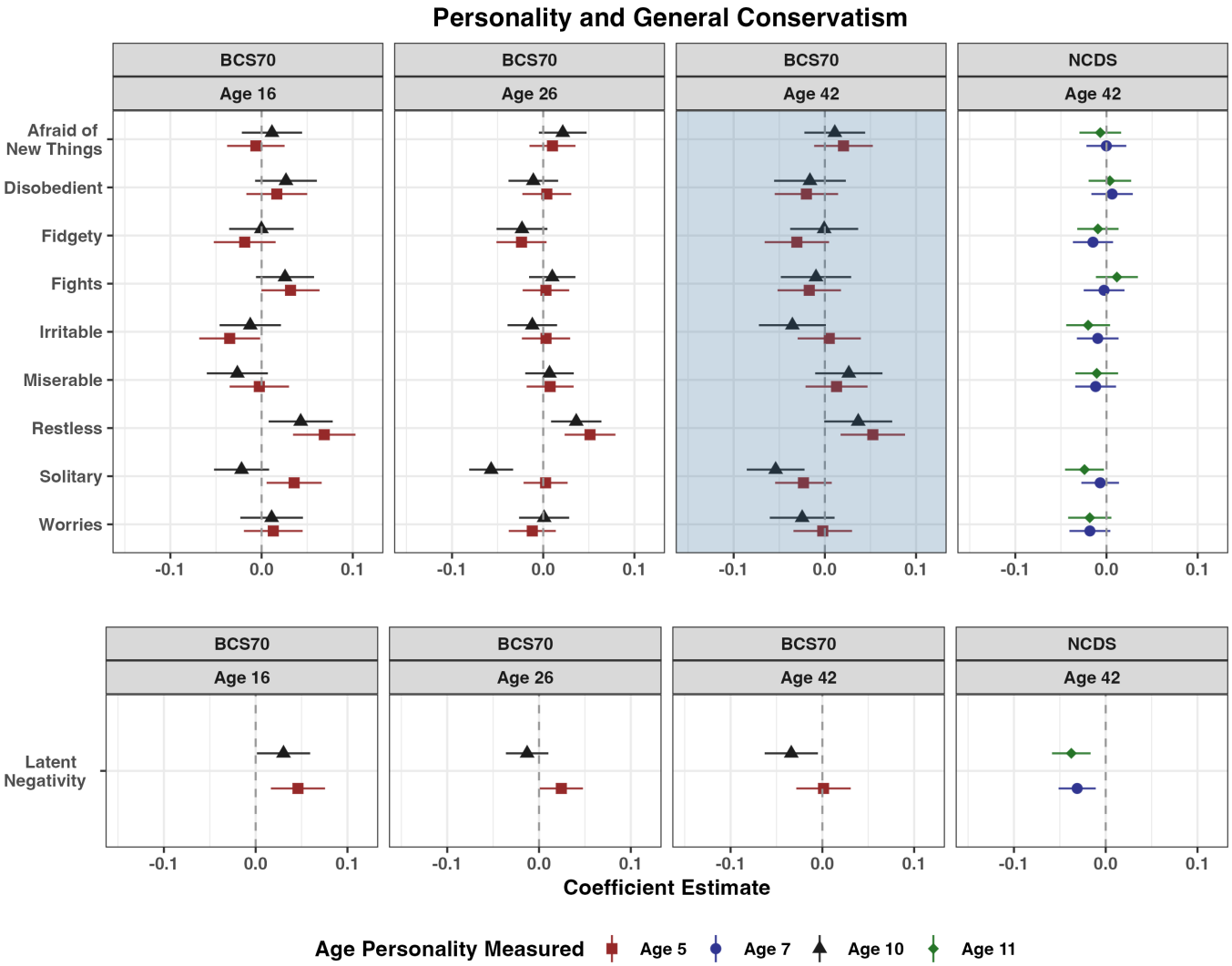

FIGURE 1 Inconsistent and very weak associations between childhood personality and general conservatism. Standardized regression coefficients from OLS regression models. Higher scores on the dependent variable indicate a more conservative ideology. The circles and triangles represent point estimates, with and 95% confidence intervals. Shaded panel has results from the preregistered test (BCS70). Regression outputs, with all frequentist inferential statistics and the sample size per model, are provided in Tables S10–S14.

5 was not. Like the NCDS, all effects are very weak. Similar results, of mostly inconsistent associations, are found when ideology was measured at age 16 (leftmost panel of Figure 1) and at age 26 (second panel from the left of Figure 1). To summarize, across the two studies and different waves of each study dozens of tests do not provide much support for the hypothesis that negative childhood traits are positively associated with conservatism (*H1*).

Turning to social conservatism, the pattern is similar. For the NCDS (rightmost panel of Figure 2), a few of the personality traits, such as childhood willingness to fight, were positively and statistically significant—but again very weakly—associated with adult social conservatism (age 7: $\beta = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$; age 11: $\beta = 0.07$, $p < 0.001$), the majority of the measures were either insignificant or in the wrong direction, and the effects were always very small. The results for the preregistered analysis of the BCS70 show the same inconsistent associations between childhood personality and social conservatism (second panel from the right of Figure 2). Unlike the NCDS, there are no positive and statistically significant associations between childhood willingness to fight and social conservatism. For the majority of the traits, the results are inconsistent and circle around the point estimate of 0. The exception is childhood restlessness, where we find positive and, in all but one instance, statistically significant associations between childhood restlessness and social conservatism. For all other childhood traits, the results remain inconsistent and vary closely around the point estimate of 0. To summarize, we find that only 20 of the 70 measures of childhood personality traits had a statistically significant association with social conservatism. Of these 20, only 11

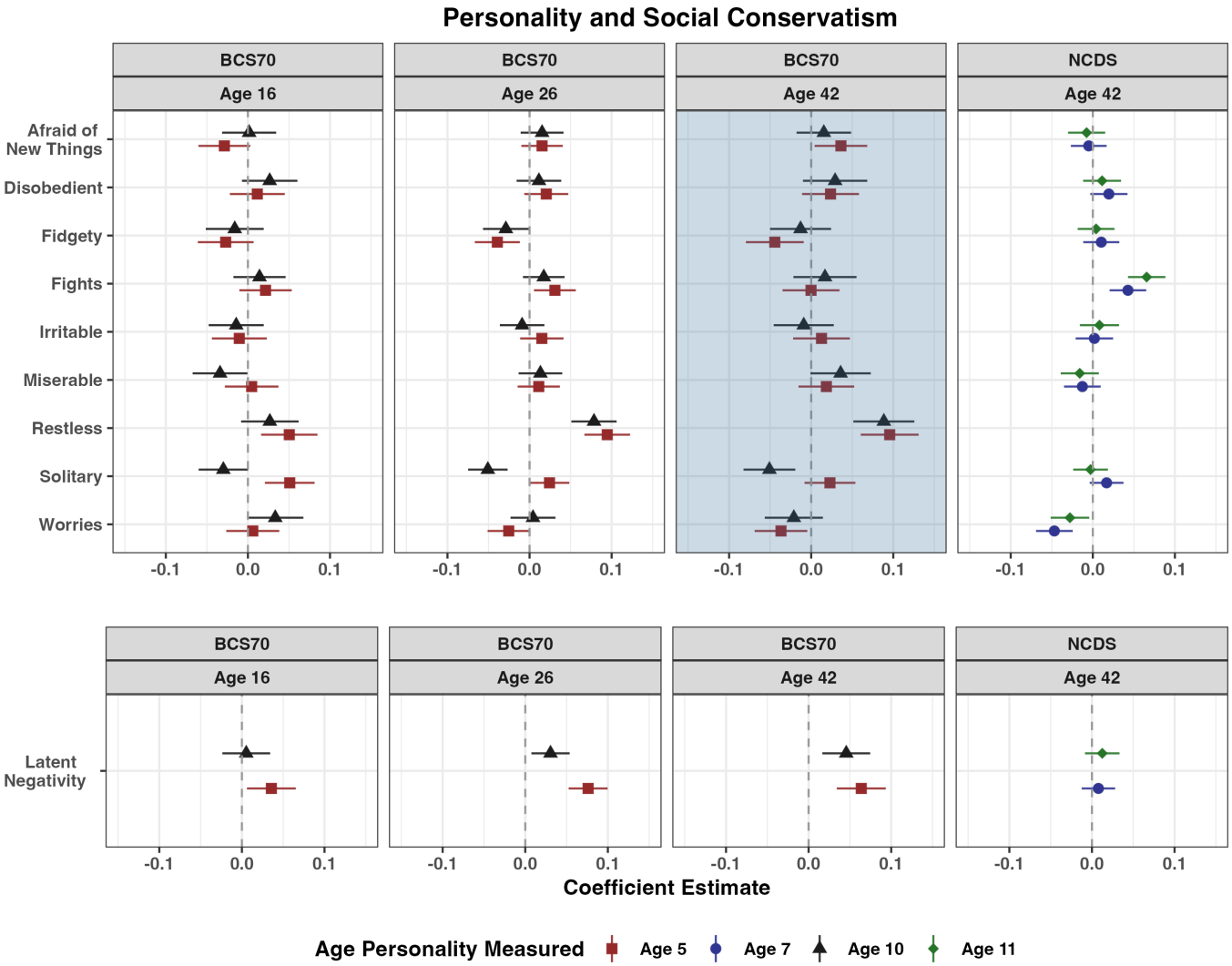

FIGURE 2 Inconsistent and very weak association between childhood personality and social conservatism. Standardized regression coefficients from OLS regression models. Higher scores on the dependent variable indicate a more conservative ideology. The circles and triangles represent point estimates, with and 95% confidence intervals. Shaded panel has results from the preregistered test (BCS70). Regression outputs, with all frequentist inferential statistics and the sample size per model, are provided in Tables S10–S14.

were in the preregistered positive direction, but with very small effect sizes.

The results for the latent negativity model are similar to those of the item-by-item analyses (bottom panel of Figure 2): five of the eight models have negative childhood personality positively correlated with social conservatism, while three were nonsignificant. While the results point in the expected direction, they are not as robust as our preregistered hypotheses predicted. First, in the NCDS at age 42 the results are not statistically significant and very close to 0, while in the BCS70, the most consistent evidence is actually for the correlations between ideology at age 42 and childhood negativity, while the effects at age 16 are of smaller magnitude and only statistically significant for personality measured at age 5 and not age 10. To summarize, we conclude that there is not much evidence for the hypothesis that negative childhood personality traits are positively associated with social conservatism (*H2*).

Finally, the results for economic conservatism are also convoluted. Starting with the NCDS (rightmost panel of Figure 3), we find that out of the eight personality traits measured for the NCDS, only two showed a consistent statistically significant association with economic conservatism in both waves: childhood solitude and willingness to fight were negatively associated with economic conservatism. However, these were in the opposite direction of the preregistered effect. The other six traits show an inconsistent pattern: eight out of the 12 coefficients are negative instead of positive.

The results of the preregistered analysis of the association between childhood personality and adult ideology at age 42 using the BCS70 (second panel from the right

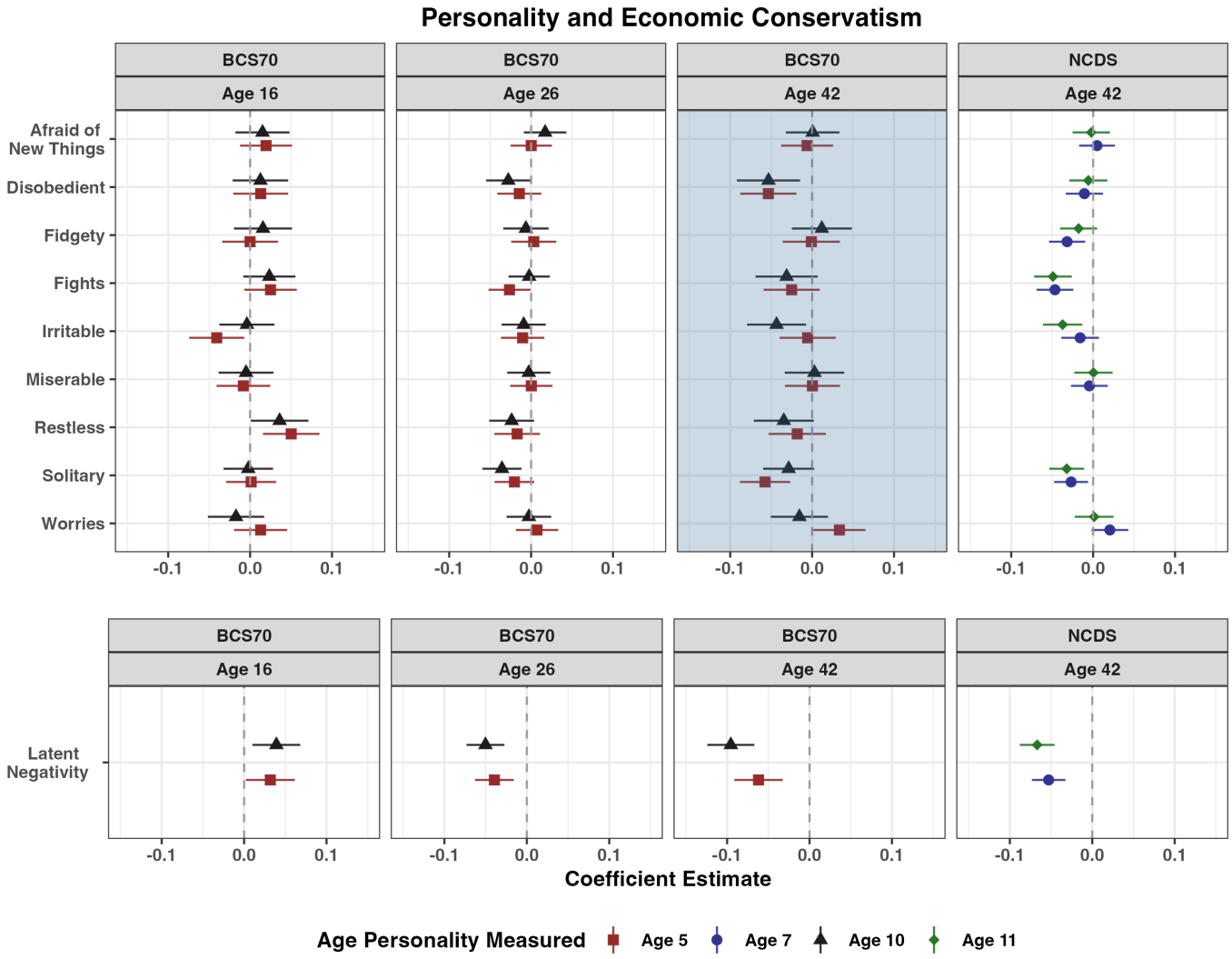

FIGURE 3 Inconsistent and very weak association between childhood personality and economic conservatism. Standardized regression coefficients from OLS regression models. Higher scores on the dependent variable indicate a more conservative ideology. The circles and triangles represent point estimates, with and 95% confidence intervals. Shaded panel has results from the preregistered test (BCS70). Regression outputs, with all frequentist inferential statistics and the sample size per model, are provided in Tables S10–S14.

of Figure 3) are inconsistent with the preregistered expectation. Moreover, the few statistically significant associations did not align with the findings in the NCDS. In the BCS70, for instance, we find a consistently negative and statistically significant association between childhood disobedience and economic conservatism—a pattern we did not see in the NCDS. The tests using ideology at age 16 and age 26 align with these findings. In total, only 17 of the 70 measures of childhood personality traits had a statistically significant association with economic conservatism, and only three of them were in the expected preregistered direction. The test using the latent negativity model aligns with the item-by-item analyses (bottom panel of Figure 3): only two of the models show positive correlations with adult conservatism, while six of the models show negative correlations with adult conservatism. To conclude, the results for economic conservatism do not provide support for our third hypothesis that negative childhood personality is positively associated with economic conservatism (*H3*).

3.2 | Quantifying our (null) findings using *q* values and Bayes factors

Out of 210 individual personality tests in the regression results, only 45 were statistically significant at the set two-sided alpha level (0.05), and 26 of the 47 (over 57 percent) were in the opposite direction than we hypothesized. Due to repeated testing, several of the significant results could be false positives. To investigate this, we calculated the *q*-value, which is "a measure of

significance in terms of the false discovery rate rather than the false positive rate" (Storey & Tibshirani, 2003, p. 9440) for each test. With a total of 27 significant *q* values, there is evidence that 27 of the 47 statistically significant effects are likely false positives. For the latent negativity models, 19 of the 24 tests in the regression results were significant. With a total of 16 significant *q* values, there is evidence that 16 of the 19 statistically significant effects are likely false positives.

Null hypothesis tests cannot be interpreted as providing evidence for the null. In order to assess the degree to which our findings support the null hypothesis that childhood personality traits are *not* associated with adult ideology, we calculated Bayes Factors, which are indices of relative evidence of one "model" over another (Makowski et al., 2019). Starting with general conservatism (see the top panel of Table 2), only one out of 70 parameters provided evidence in favor of the preregistered alternative

TABLE 2 Bayes factors showing evidence in favor of the null.

Scale	Parameter	Age 5 to 16	Age 5 to 26	Age 5 to 42	Age 7 to 42†	Age 10 to 16	Age 10 to 26	Age 10 to 42	Age 11 to 42†
General conservatism	Restless	0.03	3.03	6.87		4.21	26.64	46.97	
	Fidgety	300.35	403.95	403.74	650.43	144.68	388.08	125.43	403.93
	Fights	12.29	240.81	334.35	463.75	24.64	123.17	270.46	252.84
	Worries	68.53	273.14	103.89	364.05	74.86	178.59	332.49	410.1
	Solitary	5.31	265.93	378.23	444.09	431.75	587.64	528.81	719.64
	Irritable	402.41	194.46	138.05	405.71	244.5	328.3	490.77	642.7
	Miserable	164.03	128.87	82.33	413.86	329.62	133.3	44.72	367.13
	Disobedient	56.05	188.29	342.54	167.99	22.97	418.07	316.98	194.67
	Afraid of new things	174.48	101.18	63.26	225.68	80.68	27.36	86.94	311.64
	Negativity	0.48	13.94	156.5	705.73	9.07	410.47	559.04	553.77
Social conservatism	Restless	1.02	0.02	0.01		24.57	0.01	0.04	
	Fidgety	380.19	452.07	365.96	87.54	244.26	494.64	220.64	160.83
	Fights	35.5	5.64	162.07	0.36	66.83	41.57	66.08	0.01
	Worries	104.3	547.5	415.38	686.39	11.12	143.04	289.26	677.21
	Solitary	0.66	14.16	30.18	31.7	543.69	597.71	461.53	281.64
	Irritable	227.61	59.26	74.29	175.79	253.94	286.95	211.85	114.11
	Miserable	113.04	90.29	51.28	384.93	390.79	70.99	10.98	449.49
	Disobedient	74.61	32.31	33.22	26.57	22.59	80.57	25.33	82.98
	Afraid of new things	369.06	52.17	7.22	300.83	127.97	59.5	60.93	359.85
	Negativity	4.74	00.0	0.05	108.75	127.72	3.43	0.81	687.88
Economic conservatism	Restless	1.34	387.21	292.11		8.51	473.81	424.97	
	Fidgety	137.55	148.59	157.44	898.97	58.81	247.11	79.09	545.79
	Fights	24.28	627.75	361.88	655.38	27.42	237.89	377.69	580.22
	Worries	71.85	115.78	9.55	21.74	289.7	200.63	270.04	192.99
	Solitary	134.92	558.97	556.03	658.85	191.26	617.82	444.76	870.62
	Irritable	432.66	292.05	190.51	464.07	166.67	279.91	492.51	556.16
	Miserable	217.26	195.77	154.67	273.9	179.59	208.14	131.99	210.75
	Disobedient	73.21	388.66	502.02	389.19	70.37	563.22	480.42	306.01
	Afraid of new things	48.23	185.33	196.26	155.98	61.17	45.89	153.79	251.07
	Negativity	8.69	658.67	462.88	788	2.66	687.25	447.68	730.49

Note: BF = 1 equals no evidence; 1 < BF ≤ 3 equals weak evidence; 3 < BF ≤ 20 equals positive evidence; 20 < BF ≤ 150 equals strong evidence; and BF > 150 equals very strong evidence. Rules apply to BFs as ratios (Raftery, 1995).

†Indicates data from NCDS; Otherwise from BCS70. 95% credibility intervals for effect sizes can be derived from the replication files.

hypothesis, and 65 out of 70 parameters provide "strong" or "very strong" evidence for the null hypothesis. In terms of the latent negativity models for general conservatism, five of the eight parameters provide evidence strongly in favor of the null, two provide evidence in favor of the null, and only one provides evidence in favor of the alternative hypothesis.

Turning to social conservatism (see the middle panel of Table 2), only seven of the 70 parameters provide evidence in favor of the alternative hypothesis, while 59 tests provide "strong" or "very strong" evidence for the null hypothesis of no effect. Along these lines, in the latent negativity models five tests provide evidence in favor of the null, while three provides evidence in favor of the alternative.

Economic conservatism is much like general conservatism: none of the 70 parameters provide evidence in favor of the alternative hypothesis, and all but three parameters provide "strong" or "very strong" evidence in favor of the null (see the bottom panel of Table 2). Along these lines, in the latent negativity models, all parameters provide evidence in favor of the null, and six provide "strong" or "very strong" evidence in favor of the null. To conclude, the q-factors and Bayesian analyses support the conclusion that there are very weak and inconsistent associations between the measured childhood personality and conservatism (H1), social conservatism (H2), or economic conservatism (H3).

3.3 | Non-preregistered robustness checks

Inspired by reviewers and some thoughts that we developed *after* the preregistration of our study, we conducted a series of five non-preregistered robustness checks. First, contrary to Block and Block (2006), we find that the association between childhood personality and adult ideology is not conditional on gender (see Supplement S.6, Figures S3–S8).

Second, measurement error in the independent variable or dependent variable could lead to more statistically insignificant findings even if the effect were real in the population. To address this concern, we conducted a simulation in which we assumed a true effect a priori and varied the amount of measurement error. We ran 400 simulations where we regressed the dependent variable on the independent variable and set the sample size to 4000 observations (which is less than the sample size in our both 2 samples). We varied the level of measurement error by simulating different Cronbach's alpha levels for the latent negative trait (measured with three items) that ranged from 0.1 to 0.8 (in increments of 0.1) and we varied the effect size ranging from $b = 0.1$ to $b = 0.5$ (in increments of 0.1). If Cronbach's alpha is low (e.g., 0.2) and the effect size is small (e.g., $b = 0.2$), then the simulation shows that 80% of our findings would be statistically significant. When increasing Cronbach's alpha to 0.3, while keeping the effect size at $b = 0.2$, 100% of our results would be statistically significant. To conclude, even with relatively low alpha for the independent variable (e.g., high measurement error) and small effects, most findings would still be statistically significant at conventional levels ($p < 0.05$). These simulations add further evidence that measurement error in the independent variable is not a very likely explanation for our null findings. Similar conclusions are reached when we simulate measurement error in the independent and dependent at the same time.

Third, we find very limited evidence that the association between personality and ideology becomes weaker (or stronger) as people become older (see Supplement S.7 for a discussion and Tables S15, S16 for the results). Fourth, controlling for parental characteristics—e.g., both parents' education level, occupation, and race—measured at the same time as the children's personality traits does not affect the results (see Supplement S.8, Table S17). Fifth, childhood creativity—assessed at age 11 in the NCDS—did not correlate consistently with adult conservatism (see Supplement S.9, Table S18).

4 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Past studies have documented a link between early childhood personality and adult political ideology. We find no consistent relationship between childhood personality and political ideology in adulthood. In the rare instance that a childhood personality trait correlated with adult ideology in both waves of a study (i.e., Willingness to Fight in NCDS), the same result could not be found in either wave of the other study (BCS70). *q* Values suggest that most of the statistically significant results are false positives, and Bayes Factors most often indicate strong evidence for the null hypothesis. Finally, consistent with the life span model (Niemi & Jennings, 1991; Sears & Funk, 1999), we find mixed, and at best, suggestive evidence that the associations between childhood personality and adult ideology are a bit stronger at age 16 compared to age 42. Yet, these tests were not preregistered, and the effects are small and inconsistent.

We relied on two unique longitudinal studies. Using these valuable public resources, we had to make the most out of measures that were collected by others in ways that imperfectly tap into the concepts we wished to measure. As such, our study design does not perfectly replicate

the designs of previous research studying the childhood personality–adult ideology link. While we believe that our design captures the essence of previous survey designs and produces good measures of negativity bias and political ideology, we cannot be sure that the differences between our study design and previous ones explain the null findings and/or the differences between our results and those documented by others. We see at least four possible points of attention when it comes to our measures.

First, the political context (the United Kingdom) could attenuate the link between childhood personality and adulthood ideology. On the one hand, the cross-sectional associations between personality and ideology in the United States have been replicated in Western countries like the United Kingdom (e.g., Bakker, 2017; Osborne et al., 2018). That said, context could condition the association between personality and ideology (Malka et al., 2014). More research using fully comparable cross-country research designs is needed to address if and to what extent context affects the association between childhood personality and adult ideology.

Second, we relied upon measures of personality that contained measurement error. In the ideal scenario, we would have measures of childhood personality that consist of less measurement error like Fraley et al. (2012). Our models using the latent negativity dimension and our simulations do not suggest that measurement error explains our findings. Still, we welcome future studies using "better" measures of childhood personality and ideology.

Along the same lines, we were limited to the subset of personality measures that the NCDS and BCS70 included from the Rutter Children's Behavior Questionnaire. Some of these metrics corresponded to personality traits typically associated with ideology, such as using "afraid of new experiences" (main text) and childhood creativity (Supplement S.9) as an indicator of Openness which is the strongest correlate of ideology in adulthood (Osborne et al., 2018). Other measures we employed pertained to domains of the negativity bias which might have weaker connections to ideology, including "fidgety," "worries often," and "irritable." These could be considered as indicators of Neuroticism, which in meta-analyses has a weaker but consistent association with conservatism (Osborne et al., 2018). Despite observing no differences between our Openness-related and Neuroticism-related measures, it is plausible that more robust associations might have been discovered if a broader range of Openness measures had been incorporated. We encourage future longitudinal studies to include such measures.

Third, childhood personality was measured at age 5 and 10 (BCS70) or 7 and 11 (NCDS), which is later than the other studies which measured childhood personality at age 3 (Block & Block, 2006) or at 54 months (Fraley et al., 2012; Wegemer & Vandell, 2020). However, we find no indication that the association between childhood personality and ideology is conditional on age: the associations at age 5 (BCS70) or age 7 (NCDS) with ideology in adulthood are not stronger or more consistent as those at age 10 (BCS70) or age 11 (NCDS).

Fourth, Block and Block (2006) relied on measures of personality collected by the nursery school teachers, while we relied on childhood personality scored by the parents. Generally, the concurrent validity of personality measures is quite high for children (Tackett et al., 2016). Moreover, Fraley et al. (2012) and Wegemer and Vandell (2020) also relied on ratings of parents.

Regardless of these limitations, we think our unique longitudinal samples in a new context allowed us to broaden and deepen the literature into the link between childhood personality and adult ideology. We offer evidence that the results of previous research are not as robust or as consistent as many scholars in the extant literature presume. Going forward, we need to understand the mechanisms that link distal causes to ultimate effects (Elster, 1999). A life span approach that tracks people from early childhood into adulthood with repeated measures of personality and political ideology is a start. Such studies could also pay attention to triggers in the environment that contribute to whether and how personality shapes political ideology (e.g., De Neve, 2015).

Our study has implications for the role of personality in understanding politics. Ideological differences are often attributed to the psychological makeup of citizens by academics (Hibbing et al., 2014; Jost et al., 2009), pundits (Maddow, 2020; Melber, 2021), and the news media (Brueck, 2018; Resnick, 2017). If political ideology is rooted in personality traits that form well in advance of adulthood, it would imply that political conflicts in society might be more intractable than standard models of political attitude formation suggest (Hibbing et al., 2014). We find inconsistent and very weak links between childhood personality and political ideology in adulthood. Our findings should not be interpreted as firm evidence against the thesis that personality traits shape political attitudes. Personality traits are not set in stone in childhood and, even if they were, the political environment may play a crucial role in activating a link between personality traits and political attitudes in adulthood. Nonetheless, our findings do call into question a key piece of evidence that is often cited for why we should lend a causal interpretation to cross-sectional correlations between personality traits and political attitudes in adults. We join other researchers (e.g., Bakker et al., 2021; Reifen-Tagar & Cimpian, 2022) in calling for more research to study the origins and

development of political ideology and the role of personality in this process.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Neil Fasching contributed to conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, writing—original draft, and writing—review and editing. Kevin Arceneaux contributed to methodology, writing—original draft, writing—review and editing, and supervision. Bert N. Bakker contributed to conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, writing—original draft, writing—review and editing, and supervision.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors report no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Both the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70) and the National Child Development Study (NCDS) can be accessed by researchers through the UK Data Service at the University of Essex. Anyone wishing to access the data will need to register with the UK Data Service before downloading.

ETHICS APPROVAL STATEMENT

The data were approved through the National Health Service (NHS) Research Ethics Committee system. This remains a decentralized system. Local research ethics committees (LRECS), based in each Health Authority, were the first to be established; and smaller number of multicenter research ethics committees (MRECs) later removed the need for national studies or those covering more than one Health Authority area to approach many/all LRECs. NHS Research Ethics Committees (RECs) are appointed by the Strategic Health Authorities in England, their equivalents in Scotland and Wales and the Health and Social Care Business Services Organization in Northern Ireland. RECs safeguard the rights, safety, dignity, and well-being of people participating in research. They review applications for research and give an opinion about the proposed participant involvement and whether the research is ethical. Each consists of between seven and 18 volunteer members. At least one third of the members must be "lay" whose main personal or professional interest is not in a research area. The remainder of the committee are expert members, who are specialists including doctors, other healthcare professionals and academics. MREC ethical approval was sought for the NCDS and BCS70 follow-ups from 2000 onwards.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Illustrating the impact of this line of research, at the time of writing, scholars have cited the initial study by Block and Block (2006) 80 times since 2021, and 516 times in total.

[2] There were 13 significant associations for males and 29 for females.

[3] Using similar post hoc sensitivity analyses, the minimum population-based effect size that could reliably (e.g., with a power of 0.8) yield a statistically significant correlation ($\alpha = 0.05$) given a sample size of 659—the sample size of Fraley et al. (2012)—is $r = 0.108$ and given a sample size of 814—the sample size in (Fraley et al., 2012)—is $r = 0.098$ (Wegemer & Vandell, 2020).

[4] The composite of Block and Block (2006) also included questions about political tolerance and activism, which are generally not considered measures of ideology.

[5] A data quality check, that was not preregistered, was conducted using the BCS70 (where we can test this) showing meaningful correlations between adult personality and adult ideology. In the BCS70, the Big Five personality traits were measured with the 50-item IPIP inventory in 2008 at age 50. We correlated the Big Five traits with adult ideology measured at age 42. In line with earlier literature, Openness to Experience correlates negatively with conservatism ($r = -0.16$, $p < 0.001$) and social conservatism ($r = -0.26$, $p < 0.001$) but not economic conservatism ($r = 0.02$, $p = 0.049$), while conscientiousness correlates positively with conservatism ($r = 0.10$, $p < 0.001$), social conservatism ($r = 0.04$, $p < 0.001$), and economic conservatism ($r = 0.11$, $p < 0.001$). These results show that BCS70 is of sufficient quality to test our hypotheses. Unfortunately, the NCDS did not collect measures of adult personality but given the similar structure of the studies, we would be highly surprised if we would not reach similar conclusions with the NCDS.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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