



## Short Communication

# Do right-wing and left-wing authoritarianism predict election outcomes?: Support for Obama and Trump across two United States presidential elections



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Left-wing authoritarianism  
Right-wing authoritarianism  
U.S. presidential elections  
Obama  
Trump

## ABSTRACT

Recent research suggests authoritarianism may play a key role in election outcomes, yet that work has focused almost exclusively on *right-wing* authoritarianism. In the present work, we compare the ability of Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) and Left-Wing Authoritarianism (LWA) to predict support for candidates during two U.S. Presidential elections (total  $n = 1582$ ). Samples of Americans who reported their support for each candidate after both the 2008 ( $n = 467$ ) and 2016 ( $n = 1115$ ) elections revealed that LWA was a better predictor of support for Obama during the 2008 election, whereas RWA was a better predictor of support for Trump during the 2016 election. LWA and RWA were both weaker predictors of the candidate that ultimately lost in each election. Implications for current understanding of (1) the connection between authoritarianism and election outcomes, and (2) the predictive power of authoritarianism (as distinguished from self-reported political identity) are both discussed.

In the last U.S. Presidential election, authoritarianism in the voting populace likely played a crucial role in explaining why Trump won. Not only do polling data show that authoritarianism may have been a unique predictor of Trump support (MacWilliams, 2016), but two *MTurk* studies revealed that authoritarianism-related measures predicted Trump support during the election (Choma & Hanoch, 2017; Ludeke, Klitgaard, & Vitriol, 2018).

Explanations of the connection between authoritarianism and support for Trump range from theories that tie authoritarianism to a response to threat (e.g., Duckitt, Bizumic, Krauss, & Heled, 2010; Feldman, 2003; Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski & Sulloway, 2003; see Choma & Hanoch, 2017, for discussion) to cognitive associations of authoritarianism (e.g., Choma & Hanoch, 2017). Although these explanations are valid, they are also incomplete because they focus on authoritarianism only on one side of the political spectrum – right-wing authoritarianism (RWA). If we want to more fully understand the importance of authoritarianism on election outcomes, we need to evaluate the possible influence of authoritarianism across the political board.

## 1. Left-Wing authoritarianism

The concept of left-wing authoritarianism (LWA) – the idea that liberalism may be subject to the same reliance on simple authority and

psychological rigidity as conservatism – has a controversial history in psychology. Whereas some have expressed skepticism about left-wing authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1996; Jost et al., 2003; Stone, 1980), others have argued that left-wing authoritarianism is a valid construct (e.g., Malka, Lelkes, & Holzer, 2017; McFarland, Ageyev, & Djintcharadze, 1996; Mullen, Bauman, & Skitka, 2003; Ray, 1983; Van Hiel, Duriez, & Kossowska, 2006). To help better understand these discrepancies, researchers recently developed an LWA scale (Conway, Houck, Gornick, & Repke, 2017a) that is parallel to Altemeyer's widely-used RWA scale. Consistent with an approach that LWA is a valid construct, this new LWA measurement was positively related to measures of prejudice, dogmatism, political liberalism, and attitude strength. Further, LWA showed very similar effect sizes as RWA's relation to those constructs overall, although dogmatism showed stronger relationships with RWA, whereas attitude strength showed stronger relationships with LWA (Conway, Repke, & Houck, 2017a).

## 2. Right-wing authoritarianism and left-wing authoritarianism in elections

Would we expect LWA to predict support for left-wing candidates during elections in the same way that RWA predicted support for Trump in the 2016 election? To the degree that authoritarianism on the left is,

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like authoritarianism on the right, a response to threat (e.g., Choma & Hanoch, 2017; Crawford, 2017; Duckitt et al., 2010; Feldman, 2003; Jost et al., 2003), we might expect differences in effect sizes for RWA and LWA depending on the level of perceived threat to their associated ideology. One way this might be expressed is in the degree that candidates running for elections are perceived as a reaction to dominance from the other side of the political spectrum – that is, there is a feeling of general threat to one's prized ideology due to perceived lack of power. Elections in response to years of dominance from the other political party might be especially likely to have the corresponding authoritarianism measure show stronger predictive power, because they might induce a larger feeling of threat than when one's own party has been in power.

In the present study, we use available data compare the predictive validity of LWA and RWA on candidate support from two different U.S. Presidential elections: One which occurred after Republicans had been in power for eight years (2008) and one which occurred after Democrats had been in power for eight years (2016). Because we are interested in separating out the purely ideological part of each scale from its more authoritarian component (indeed, the effects of authoritarianism on elections are sometimes completely accounted for by ideology; see Ludeke et al., 2018), we further controlled for a standard self-report measurement of political identification, as well as relevant demographic variables.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Overview of design

All participants completed either an RWA or LWA scale, measurements of support for each of the two primary candidates in the election in question (2008 or 2016), an ideology measure, and relevant demographic variables. All participant responses occurred after the relevant election occurred.

#### 3.2. Participants and sample timing

The 2008 election sample consisted of 467 undergraduates at the University of Montana who participated for course credit in large-group sessions. They participated in September of 2010 and were generally young (mean age = 20), largely Caucasian (88%), 65% female, and slightly left-leaning politically (4.4 on a political self-identification scale with 4.5 as the midpoint, 1 = extremely liberal/democratic, and 9 = extremely conservative/republican).

There were four samples from the 2016 election (total  $n = 1115$ ), all collected from *Mechanical Turk (MTurk)*.<sup>1</sup> The first sample occurred in June 2017, whereas samples 2–4 occurred from February to April of 2018.<sup>2</sup> Consistent with other *MTurk* samples, this sample (compared to our college sample) showed larger age diversity (mean age = 38), larger ethnic diversity (60% Caucasian, with other large represented groups including African American and Asian American), a more even split between males and females (48% female), but was similarly

<sup>1</sup> *MTurk* has been validated for use as a representative sample for research related to politics and political ideology (see, e.g., Clifford, Jewell, & Waggoner, 2015), generally shows similar results as other samples (for an example, see Conway, Houck, et al., 2017a; Houck et al., 2014), and has been used in recent work evaluating authoritarianism and Trump support during the 2016 election (Choma and Hanoch, 2017; Ludeke et al., 2018).

<sup>2</sup> The 2008 participants and 2016 Sample 1 participants were from Studies 1 and 2 (respectively) from a prior research project (Conway, Houck, et al., 2017a). However, that project did not focus on voting behavior, and thus all data and analyses reported in the present paper are entirely novel and have not been reported before. Similarly, 2016 Samples 2–4 were originally collected as part of separate projects with completely different aims. We here report only on the parts of those projects that are directly relevant to the current study.

slightly left-leaning (4.2 on political self-identification scale with 4.5 as the midpoint). Although we combine these 2016 samples for main analyses, we also provide sample-specific summaries in tabular form. We further return to the issue of the comparability of the 2008 and 2016 samples in the discussion.

#### 3.3. Measures

##### 3.3.1. LWA/RWA

In all samples, consistent with prior work (Conway, Houck, et al., 2017a), participants were randomly assigned to receive either the RWA scale (Altemeyer, 1996) or the LWA scale (Conway, Houck, et al., 2017a).<sup>3</sup> Reliability for both scales was satisfactory across samples (RWA  $\alpha$ s ranged from 0.91 to 0.97,  $mean = 0.95$ ; LWA  $\alpha$ s ranged from 0.84 to 0.90,  $mean = 0.88$ ).

##### 3.3.2. Support for U.S. presidential candidates

To measure support for presidential candidates, in the 2008 Election and Samples 2–4 of the 2016 election, participants were asked “In the last presidential election, I voted for:” followed by the two primary candidates in the election and an option for “neither/cannot say” (2008) or “other” and “none/cannot say” (2016).<sup>4</sup> Sample 1 from the 2016 election measured support for each candidate in a continuous fashion with 1–7 scale anchors: “In the last U.S. Presidential Election, I supported [Donald Trump/Hillary Clinton].”

To compute comparable scores for analyses, we created two variables: One for support for the Democratic Candidate in each election and one for support for the Republican Candidate.<sup>5</sup>

##### 3.3.3. Political ideology

All participants also completed a standard two-item political self-identification scale, with items anchored by liberal/conservative and democratic/republican (e.g., Conway et al., 2012; Conway et al., 2016; Conway, Houck, et al., 2017a; see also, e.g., Jost et al., 2003).

### 4. Results

Table 1 reports zero-order correlations and partial correlations that

<sup>3</sup> We opted for this between-subjects approach in order to minimize the possibility of contamination effects between the scales and maximize power to test key relationships. While within-subjects approaches would allow us to directly control for the other questionnaire, those approaches also open up the possibility that participants simply would not respond to any of the remaining questionnaires (including the DVs) the same due to the presence of the additional questionnaire. Thus, we opted for a cleaner approach, whereby we felt we could make inferences without concern that completing one questionnaire influenced the subsequent relationship between constructs. However, given the trade-offs involved, it would be fruitful for future research to consider using both between- and within-subjects designs.

<sup>4</sup> Because we were interested in the likelihood of active support for each candidate, we purposefully included all participants in these measures, including those who did not vote for either candidate in question. Our goal was to gauge support for each candidate independently. These measures thus indicate support for each candidate (and not opposition to any candidate), in a standardized way that allows us to compare across studies. The descriptive distribution of these measures confirms the general left-leaning nature of our sample: For the 2008 Election, 34.4% of the sample indicated they voted for Obama, 13.3% voted for McCain, and 50.4% indicated they did not vote or voted for another candidate. For the 2016 election, 43.7% voted for Clinton, 25.5% voted for Trump, and 30.8% indicated they did not vote (20.0%) or voted for another candidate (10.8%).

<sup>5</sup> In each case, for the four dichotomous samples, we entered +1 for “voted for” responses and –1 when the candidate was not chosen. For the one continuous variable, we converted the scores to z-scores. This method ensures that neither the dichotomous nor continuous variable will be overrepresented in the results because they are converted to the same scale.

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