



Cognitive ability and authoritarianism: Understanding support for Trump and Clinton



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ABSTRACT

With Donald Trump the Republican nominee and Hillary Clinton the Democratic nominee for the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, speculations of why Trump resonates with many Americans are widespread - as are speculations of whether, independent of party identification, people might vote for Hillary Clinton. The present study, using a sample of American adults ($n = 406$), investigated whether two ideological beliefs, namely, right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and social dominance orientation (SDO) uniquely predicted Trump support and voting intentions for Clinton. Cognitive ability as a predictor of RWA and SDO was also tested. Path analyses, controlling for political party identification, revealed that higher RWA and SDO uniquely predicted more favorable attitudes of Trump, greater intentions to vote for Trump, and lower intentions to vote for Clinton. Lower cognitive ability predicted greater RWA and SDO and indirectly predicted more favorable Trump attitudes, greater intentions to vote for Trump and lower intentions to vote for Clinton.

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1. Introduction

On July 19, 2016, Donald Trump became the Republican nominee for the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. Despite the GOP's outspoken disapproval of him, Trump secured the required delegates and was officially named the Republican candidate. Speculations of what led many Republicans to support Trump have pervaded news outlets and social media. Authoritarianism has been identified as a key catalyst (Taub, 2016). In a sample of 1800 Americans, MacWilliams (2016) found that authoritarianism explained Trump support over and above key demographic characteristics of age, gender, education, religious affiliation, income, and political identification. A poll conducted by Rahn and Oliver (2016) with 1044 adults also showed that Trump supporters were higher on authoritarianism than supporters of Hillary Clinton. In both polls, researchers employed four questions created in the 1990s to measure authoritarianism. The questions cover child-rearing style preferences, providing a relatively narrow index of authoritarianism. Presently, utilizing broader measures of authoritarian ideologies (i.e., right-wing authoritarianism and social dominance orientation), we investigate whether the ideological beliefs RWA and SDO might uniquely inform evaluations of Trump and affect voting intentions for Trump and Clinton. We also explore cognitive ability as a factor theoretically underlying ideological beliefs and hence, a potential indirect source of Trump support and voting intentions for the U.S. 2016 Presidential election.

1.1. Ideological beliefs

Grappling with identifying the causes of the rise of fascism, in the wake of WW2 Adorno and colleagues (1950) proposed the 'authoritarian personality'. They argued that an authoritarian personality stemmed from repressed anger and fear in response to punitive parenting and economic hardship. Overhauling the psychometrically flawed 'authoritarian personality', in the 1980s Altemeyer proposed right-wing authoritarianism (RWA). Although initially - and still by some researchers - considered a personality dimension (Altemeyer, 1998), RWA is now also considered an ideological belief (Duckitt, 2001) that people should obey and respect authorities deemed as legitimate, abide by social conventions, and endorse harsh punishment of norm violators. In contrast to the psychoanalytic underpinnings of the 'authoritarian personality', social learning stressing obedience to authorities, fear and aggressiveness, and adherence to social norms is theorized to nurture RWA (Altemeyer, 1996, 1998). Strong associations between RWA scores of parents and their children suggest socialization and genetic factors likely contribute to a right-wing authoritarian ideology (Dhont, Roets, & Van Hiel, 2013).

Complementing Altemeyer's authoritarianism construct, (Pratto and Sidanius 1999; Pratto et al., 1994) proposed social dominance theory and social dominance orientation (SDO). SDO-also now widely considered an ideological belief rather than a personality variable (Duckitt, 2001; Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006)-concerns the belief that relations between social groups should reflect a hierarchy with some groups wielding more power than others. Societal and evolutionary factors are proposed to underlie SDO (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999; Pratto,

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Sidanius, & Levin, 2006). More narrowly, being male, a dominant group member, disagreeable (Bäckström & Björklund, 2007; Pratto et al., 1994), having negative intergroup experiences, and limited affection in childhood are implicated in adopting a SDO (Duckitt, 2001; Pratto et al., 2006). Compared to RWA, SDO typically shows lower levels of heritability (e.g., Kandler, Bleidorn, & Riemann, 2012).

In psychology, RWA and SDO are the most popular indices of authoritarianism, measured with comprehensive scales comprising items on a range of attitudes (Duckitt, 2001). Correlations between RWA and SDO range from weak to stronger than 0.60 (Altemeyer, 1998; Roccato & Ricolfi, 2005). Factors including the strength of ideological contrast of a particular context affect the strength of the association between RWA and SDO (Roccato & Ricolfi, 2005). In countries where political orientation can be summarized by a single left-right dimension, such as Belgium, Britain, and New Zealand (i.e., countries with a strong ideological contrast), RWA and SDO tend to be more strongly connected. Conversely, in countries where political orientation is better summarized by two or more dimensions (e.g., a social left-right dimension and an economic left-right dimension; see e.g., Choma, Ashton, & Hafer, 2010), such as Canada, South Africa, and the U.S. (i.e., countries with weaker ideological contrasts), the magnitude of their association tends to be smaller (Duckitt, 2001). Further, in some countries, including Poland and Japan, the correlation is near zero (Duriez, Van Hiel, & Kossowska, 2005; Kandler et al., 2015). Therefore, RWA and SDO are theoretically distinguishable concepts that capture statistically unique types of authoritarianism. Moreover, whereas those higher in SDO might be characterized as 'leaders', believing that they and their ingroup are superior to others and should have more power, those higher in RWA might be better thought of as 'followers', rigidly enforcing and abiding by social rules and conventions (see Altemeyer, 1998). Thus, in countries like the U.S., both RWA and SDO are poised to independently inform political behaviors, including attitudes and voting intentions toward Trump and Clinton.

Incorporating RWA and SDO, Duckitt (2001) outlined the Dual Process Model of ideological attitudes. According to this model, RWA and SDO are rooted in distinct psychological and social factors, and predict shared and unique outcomes through two distinct pathways (Duckitt, 2001). More specifically, social contexts defined as threatening and personality traits like social conformity theoretically lead individuals to adopt a view that the world is an unstable, unpredictable, and unsafe place, in turn fostering higher RWA. Consequently, higher RWAs hold negative attitudes toward outgroups deemed socially threatening and support policies that seek to preserve social order and control (Duckitt & Sibley, 2007). Conversely, social contexts defined as competitive and personality traits like tough-mindedness position individuals to adopt a view that the world is competitive and governed by dominance and superiority, in turn leading to higher SDO (Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt & Sibley, 2009). Individuals higher (vs. lower) in SDO are particularly attuned to threats of dominance and superiority. As a result, SDOs hold negative attitudes toward outgroups perceived of as disadvantaged or lower-status and support policies that sustain intergroup hierarchies (Duckitt & Sibley, 2007).

One implication of the Dual Process Model (Duckitt, 2001; Duckitt & Sibley, 2009) is that RWA and SDO can predict similar outcomes, but for different reasons. In explaining support for Trump, drawing on the Dual Process Model, those higher (vs. lower) in RWA and SDO might endorse Trump because he resonates with RWAs fear of socially threatening groups and SDOs disdain of inferior groups. In one illustration of this assertion, Trump's proposed "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until our country's representatives can figure out what is going on" (DonaldTrump.com, 2015) in response to the San Bernardino terrorist attack advocates policy that, from the perspective of those higher in RWA promises to maintain social order and, from the perspective of those higher in SDO promises to preserve or restore power relations. Thus, we expect that RWA and SDO will predict greater support for Trump, higher intentions to vote for Trump, and lower intentions to vote for Clinton.

1.2. Ideological beliefs and cognitive ability

Theory and research on the causes of RWA and SDO have focused more heavily on motivational predictors. Yet, cognitive factors, including cognitive style and cognitive ability have long been connected to ideology, including authoritarianism (McCourt et al., 1999; Kemmelmeier, 2010; Stankov, 2009). Individuals higher in authoritarian ideology are cognitively rigid and dogmatic (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Van Hiel, Onraet, & DePauw, 2010). Of particular relevance, there is evidence that authoritarianism is linked, in part, to lower cognitive ability (see Onraet et al., 2015). Contemporary research shows that those higher in RWA, in particular, perform less well on cognitive ability tasks (Choma, Hodson, Hoffarth, Charlesford, & Hafer, 2014; Heaven, Ciarrochi, & Leeson, 2011; Van Hiel et al., 2010). Recently, Onraet et al. (2015), using meta-analyses, reported an average effect size of $r = -0.30$ between cognitive ability and authoritarianism, based on 27 samples with a total of 18,142 participants. In studying the association between cognitive ability and authoritarianism, researchers have predominantly examined the relation between ability and RWA or related concepts. Indeed, the connection between lower cognitive ability and higher RWA is arguably robust (Onraet et al., 2015). Far fewer studies have examined the relation between SDO and cognitive ability. The minimal research thus far on SDO and cognitive ability is mixed with some studies noting a negative association (Heaven et al., 2011) and others finding no relation (Choma et al., 2014). Thus, there is a great need for research exploring the nature of the relation between cognitive ability and SDO.

1.3. The present research

The present research addressed three main goals. First, it explores the relation between ideological beliefs and cognitive ability, as the majority of research in this area has focused on motivational factors. One possible reason for the imbalance is the relative difficulty in accessing cognitive ability measures compared to measures of motivational variables. Addressing this hurdle, Condon and Revelle (2014) created the International Cognitive Ability Resource measure (ICAR). The ICAR is a publicly available measure of cognitive ability with demonstrated validity based on analyses with 97,000 participants. The test comprises four item types: Three-Dimensional Rotations, Letter and Number Series, Matrix Reasoning, and Verbal Reasoning. Items from the ICAR were used in the present study to assess cognitive ability. In exploring the cognitive ability connection with ideology beliefs, the present study investigated relations between cognitive ability and both dimensions of authoritarian ideology, namely, RWA and SDO.

Second, support for Donald Trump might be attributed to authoritarian beliefs. Indeed, both those higher (vs. lower) in RWA and SDO might support Trump because he resonates with RWAs fear of socially threatening groups and SDOs contempt for inferior groups. Hence, the present research investigated whether RWA and SDO uniquely predict Trump support in a sample of American adults. Whether voting intentions for Hillary Clinton could be attributed to lower RWA and SDO was also tested.

Third, it investigated whether the association between ideological beliefs and greater Trump support and lower intentions to vote for Clinton related, in part, because of lower cognitive ability. To evaluate the influence of ideological beliefs, party affiliation was controlled for in all primary analyses.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

A sample of 451 American adults was recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk); each participant was paid \$1US. Data from MTurk samples produce reliable results, replicating robust findings in

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