



Comprehensively-measured authoritarianism *does* predict vote choice: The importance of authoritarianism's facets, ideological sorting, and the particular candidate



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ABSTRACT

Commonly used measures of authoritarian predispositions have received mixed support as a predictor of political preferences in American elections. Using new survey data (N = 1,444), we demonstrated how imprecise conceptualization and measurement of authoritarianism can obscure its relationship to candidate preferences. First, authoritarians have largely sorted into the Republican Party and self-identified as conservative, thereby attenuating the predictive power of authoritarianism when such features are used as controls or selection criteria. Second, the authoritarianism measure typically used in election studies covers a limited range of the construct, specifically focusing on the facet of authoritarianism we observed to be *least* associated with support for Republicans candidates in the 2016 American electoral context. We find predictive gains both from more comprehensive measurement of authoritarianism and from analyzing facet-level authoritarianism.

1. Introduction

Despite its theoretical and empirical relevance to the political sphere, the role of authoritarianism in predicting vote choice remains surprisingly murky. Some studies have reported the theoretically expected results in which authoritarianism positively predicts support for right-wing political candidates which, in the U.S. electoral context, includes candidates associated with the Republican party (Hetherington & Weiler, 2009, Table 7.2; Kimmelmeier, 2004). Yet others have not observed this relationship (Dusso, 2016; Pasek et al., 2009). The role of authoritarian predispositions in political psychology was perhaps never more relevant in the U.S. than during the 2016 Presidential election, in which popular accounts of the election (particularly those concerning the Republican primary) frequently invoked authoritarianism as a major force in determining support for Donald Trump's electoral success (e.g. Dean, 2015; Taub, 2016). And yet, even in this case the evidence is mixed: the two published peer-reviewed studies of which we are aware suggest that Trump supporters were particularly authoritarian (Choma & Hanoch, 2017; MacWilliams, 2016), but several other researchers have provided informal reports on internet blogs and academic forums that are inconsistent with the claim (De Jonge, 2016; Enders & Smallpage, 2016; Rahn & Oliver, 2016). This is no small issue:

a crucial component of the validation of authoritarianism measures was to demonstrate that members of authoritarian movements had elevated scores on these measures (McFarland, 2017). If authoritarianism measures cannot identify members of authoritarian movements, something has gone seriously amiss.

We perform analyses below which suggest two factors contribute to the apparent inconsistencies in the observed relationship between authoritarian predispositions and candidate preferences in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. The first factor is straightforward, deriving from the pronounced association between authoritarianism and conservative ideological self-placement in contemporary American politics. The reports outlined above vary in whether and how this association might have obscured a link between authoritarianism and vote choice. For example, analyzing voters of only a single party might obscure the relevance of authoritarianism to candidate preferences, as variability in authoritarianism among individuals who select into the same political party is truncated and therefore less able to meaningfully explain variability in vote choice (De Jonge, 2016; though see also MacWilliams, 2016). Results on more ideologically diverse samples can also be affected. For instance, previous results indicating that authoritarianism predicted support for Republican over Democratic Presidential candidates did not include ideological self-placement as a

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covariate (Choma & Hanoch, 2017; Hetherington & Weiler, 2009, Table 7.2; Kimmelmeier, 2004), in contrast to studies finding weaker effects for authoritarianism (Dusso, 2016; Pasek et al., 2009).

The second and more intriguing contributing factor pertains to the measurement of authoritarianism. The brief measure of authoritarianism favored in election studies likely only captures one component of authoritarianism – specifically, the component that in our data is least linked to support for Republicans in general as well as to Trump support in particular. This may help clarify analyses which claimed Trump voters were not particularly more authoritarian than those favoring other Republican candidates (Enders & Smallpage, 2016; Rahn & Oliver, 2016; though see also MacWilliams, 2016), as well as surprising findings indicating little relevance of authoritarianism to preferences for Republicans over Democrats in a previous election (Pasek et al., 2009). The present research will highlight the benefits of facet-level analyses of authoritarianism for identifying important nuances in the role of authoritarianism in contemporary candidate preferences. To develop intuitions about the nature of such nuances, we first turn to a review of the major concepts and measures as well as of the candidates in the 2016 Presidential election.

1.1. Authoritarianism and its facets

Contemporary theorizing and measurement of authoritarianism derives substantially from Altemeyer (1988, 1996), who narrowed the focus of previous authoritarianism measures down to three facets that highly covaried: authoritarian aggression, authoritarian submission, and conventionalism. Because Altemeyer aimed to increase the unidimensionality of his popular authoritarianism measure by deliberately including content tapping multiple components within individual items, research exploring the distinct implications and correlates of these facets was delayed.

More recently, the development of authoritarianism measures that allow for separate measurement of these facets has clarified the relationship between the construct and noteworthy outcomes: for example, authoritarian aggression uniquely predicted support for expelling illegal immigrants and negative feelings towards “dangerous” groups; conventionalism uniquely predicted high religiosity and opposition to gay rights; and authoritarian submission predicted respect for authorities and opposition to rebellion (Duckitt & Bizumic, 2013; Duckitt, Bizumic, Krauss, & Heled, 2010).

The last of these findings points to a potential divergence in the prediction of contemporary American party preference between studies using unidimensional authoritarianism measures and measures that differentiate between authoritarianism's facets. Although political conservatives typically score highly on unidimensional authoritarianism measures (Altemeyer, 1988; Ludeke, Johnson, & Bouchard, 2013), these relationships are sensitive to context (e.g. McFarland, Ageyev, & Abalakina-Paap, 1992). In the contemporary American context in which this study takes place, Republican primary voters appeared disinclined to submission: Republican primary candidates with typical claims to political authority, such as those with experience serving in high political office or support from others with such experience, were soundly rejected, and the candidates themselves recognized and attempted to adapt to the mood – e.g. Jeb Bush campaigned as an “outsider” despite an early lead in endorsements from party elites, a brother and father who served as President, and two terms as Governor of an electorally important swing-state (Bycoffe, 2016; Sullivan, 2015). Democrats, who selected a candidate with an occupational history more typical of Presidential candidates, did not appear to share this sentiment. Consistent with this Republican electoral undercurrent, the largest anti-establishment political protest movement in recent years was the Tea Party, a right-wing faction with a revolutionary ethos (Parker & Barreto, 2014). Thus, although many political positions taken by contemporary American right-wing candidates provide a good match to authoritarian aggression (e.g. strong

opposition to immigration) and conventionalism (e.g. opposition to marriage equality), less authoritarian scores on the submission facet might be expected for Republicans given this recent history.

This is noteworthy because it is the submission facet that is conceptually and empirically most closely related to the “child-rearing values” measure of authoritarianism used in most surveys concerning Trump support. This measure typically presents four pairs of items and asks respondents to indicate which value in each pairing is more important to instill in children (Feldman & Stenner, 1997; Stenner, 2005). Two pairings (obedience vs. self-reliance; independence vs. respect for elders) connect well with authoritarian submission, as indicated by items such as “Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn” (Duckitt et al., 2010),² while the other two pairings are somewhat distinct from Altemeyer's measure of authoritarianism (curiosity vs. good manners; being considerate vs. well behaved). Thus, these previous surveys on Trump support may be limited by their reliance on a measure which reflects only one facet of the broader authoritarian construct and, more importantly, the facet with the most atypical relationship with current American voting behavior.

1.2. Candidates in the 2016 presidential election

Five candidates remained in the race for the two major party nominations at the time of our data collection (mid-April 2016): Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders for the Democratic nomination, and Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, and John Kasich for the Republican nomination. Unweighted aggregated polling data reported by RealClearPolitics.com for April 12th to May 1st, a window during which we fielded our survey, indicates that Trump enjoyed a plurality of support (46.5%) among Republican voters, followed by Cruz (27.0%) and Kasich (18.0%; (Real Clear Politics, 2016b)). For Democratic supporters, during the same time period, Clinton led Sanders by approximately a 7.7% margin (Real Clear Politics, 2016a). Polling data of supporters of different candidates also addressed a wide range of specific issues with relevance to authoritarianism, helping to guide expectations for authoritarianism differences between supporters of difference candidates. Supporters of Republican candidates generally endorsed positions linked with high authoritarianism scores such as negative attitudes towards immigrants and religious minorities and restrictions on reproductive rights, with supporters of Democratic candidates taking opposing views (Pew Research Center, 2016). However, anger towards the government (which might be construed as low authoritarian submission), was higher among supporters of Republican candidates than Democratic candidates (Pew Research Center, 2016). Of equal interest is that supporters of different Democratic candidates exhibited similar issue-positions (except for Clinton supporters being less likely than Sanders supporters to indicate anger at the government), while supporters of different Republican candidates often exhibited pronounced differences not merely from Democrats but also from each other (Pew Research Center, 2016). Surveys indicated stark differences between supporters of different Republican candidates not only along the lines of general ethnocentrism but also regarding relevant issue positions such as closing mosques, preventing Muslims from entering the U.S., and deportation of immigrants living in the country without legal permission, with Trump supporters indicating the greatest hostility to these various out-groups, Kasich supporters indicating the least, and Cruz supporters intermediate between the two (De Jonge, 2016; Kalkan, 2016; Pollard & Mendelsohn, 2016; Public Policy Polling, 2016).

² No published work seems to have characterized the child-rearing values measure in terms of the authoritarian facets, but unpublished data collected by Barbara Shaffer support this characterization: in data on 152 American college students a multiple regression of the child-rearing values on authoritarianism facets (Duckitt et al., 2010) yielded only one significant predictor: authoritarian submission (beta = 0.33, $p < 0.001$; John Duckitt, personal communication, August 2, 2016).

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