Understanding Antidemocratic Tendencies through Authoritarianism and Threat

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October 28, 2020

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"The people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same way in any country." Hermann Göring[1]

On January 6, 2021, US President Donald Trump spoke to thousands at the Save America March. After months of falsely claiming that the election had been stolen from him, he again emphasized the need for his followers to fight, be strong, and take back their country. As his speech climaxed and his followers' sense of indignation at the "stolen" election mounted, Trump directed the angry crowd to the US Capitol, where the certification of President-Elect Joe Biden's win was in progress. Some in the crowd quickly turned violent as they overtook the outnumbered Capitol police and overran the Capitol, coming dangerously close to members of Congress as they called for the execution of Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House, and other "enemies" of Trump. Among the masses were many who represented well-known White supremacy hate groups, a faction particularly loyal to Trump.

How did we get here? How did a sitting US president so easily undermine Americans' confidence in a democratic election? How did so many Americans come to see their fellow citizens as mortal enemies? The answers to such questions have been pursued by the field of political psychology since the aftermath of World War II, when the same threads of hate, fear, anger, and White supremacy led German leaders and citizens in the 1930s to abandon democracy for authoritarianism, tolerance for persecution.

A large body of literature in political psychology examines who is most susceptible to authoritarian ideology and when they are likely to act on it. As Leonie Huddy, David O. Sears, and Jack S. Levy write in their introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, "public reactions to terrorism or an authoritarian response to fascist rule are closely linked to one of the perennial questions raised by political psychology: how well are citizens equipped to handle their democratic responsibilities . . . ? Can they deliberate over the issues of the day fairly to arrive at a reasoned judgment, or conversely do they . . . fall victim to irrational intolerance?"[2]

This article provides a brief overview of these perennial questions with their application to current US politics involving Trump and his followers. However, the theories and general findings presented are not limited to a US context. Indeed, much of the work referenced has been developed internationally with a particular focus on North America and Europe, and most of it predates Trump's political rise.

To help us understand how we arrived at January 6, 2021, I provide an overview of the relevant research by myself and others who have worked to understand how democratic norms of tolerance, pluralism, and the rule of law are undermined through authoritarian ideology. Rather than focus only on contemporary literature, I start with a historic overview of theories that emerged in the wake of World War II and trace the evolution of these theoretical explanations to their present forms in the interdisciplinary field of political psychology. I will attempt to shed light on the question of "how did we get here?" by breaking this question down into a set of questions that form the organization of this paper. These are:

- What are the historical and contemporary theories explaining the appeal of authoritarian ideology?
- How do social norms and perceptions of threat contribute to the "othering" of our fellow citizens?
- How did Donald Trump become the leader of the Republican Party?
- How do authoritarianism and perceived threat help us understand the erosion of liberal democratic norms?
- Where do we go from here?

These questions roughly parallel my own developmental exploration of this topic. It was the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States and the national reaction that drove me to the political psychology literature looking for answers. In the wake of those attacks, there was a dramatic spike in US nationalism, flags sold out across the country, sweeping new surveillance powers were granted to the federal government, hate crimes targeting people who were perceived as Muslim or Middle-Eastern spiked dramatically, and political discourse narrowed to a dichotomous "with us or against us" worldview. It was these reactions of nationalism and spiking hate crimes that raised my concern over the erosion of pluralistic democratic norms.

AUTHORITARIAN IDEOLOGY: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY THEORIES

Ideology refers to an "interrelated set of moral and political attitudes that possesses cognitive, affective, and motivational components. That is, ideology helps to explain why people do what they do; it organizes their values and beliefs and leads to political behavior."[3] In short, ideology is a set of

interrelated beliefs about how one thinks the social world both is and ought to be organized. Authoritarianism is a specific type of ideology that political psychologists have identified as strongly linked with nationalism, illiberalism, and ethnic persecution.

Some of the earliest work on authoritarianism in political psychology is by Erich Fromm. In his 1941 classic *Escape from Freedom*, Fromm utilizes a combination of Marxist and Freudian theory to argue that industrialization was partially responsible for the rise in fascism. According to Fromm and echoing Marx, industrialization pits workers against each other in a struggle for existence, and this competition with one's neighbor is inherently isolating. In addition, while pre-industrial societies offered little mobility, they did offer a life of prescribed meaning. One's position in life was established at birth with social status, religious identity, and vocation largely predetermined. With the shift to modern industrial societies, all of these factors were potential choices. One could choose a career, a place to live, a spouse, and even a new religious identity.[4]

Fromm believed that the isolation caused by competition, coupled with unbounded freedom of choice, was potentially overwhelming. How can one regain a sense of a purpose under such circumstances? Fromm suggested that while some citizens would be able to cope with such existential uncertainties, others would escape from existential crises by embracing authoritarianism. This Freudian-like defense allows people to escape existential freedom, what Fromm called "negative freedom," by replacing existential and epistemic uncertainty with submission to authority. Why wrestle with difficult questions about meaning and purpose if someone else has all of the answers? Answering heroic calls to war in the service of the nation is one way to find meaning and purpose. In merging one's identity with the nation-state and looking to authority for direction, one escapes potentially overwhelming existential choice. Contemporary researchers have also argued that existential and epistemic uncertainty are the major motivating factors for the adoption of authoritarian ideology.[5]

The first meaningful attempt to measure who is likely to find authoritarianism appealing was the landmark 1950 publication *The Authoritarian Personality* by Theodor Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel J. Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford. Like Fromm, these authors applied both Freudian and Marxist theory to understand ethnic prejudice and fascist sympathies. They argued that cold and harsh parenting styles produce submissive-aggressive children who as adults will respect authority but seek to displace aggression onto scapegoats. They adopted Marx's notion of the reactionary man as an overly conventional thinker who rejects reason and science in favor of tradition. For them, the authoritarian personality is largely a combination of Marx's reactionary man and displaced aggression.

Perhaps of greater long-term consequence was these authors' use of modern statistical methods to develop a measure of authoritarian susceptibility at the individual level. They sought to develop a measure that would predict who was the most prejudiced and most likely to support undemocratic

policies.[6] They viewed ethnic prejudice as the precursor to ethnic persecution and the collapse of pluralistic democratic norms. They write, "Might not such a scale yield a valid estimate of antidemocratic tendencies at the personality level? . . . The new instrument was termed the F scale, to signify its concern with implicit prefascist tendencies."[7] Their research produced one of the oldest and most foundational findings in prejudice research: that those who are prejudiced against one group tend to be prejudiced against other groups. This finding is so robust that today prejudice against a variety of groups is often assessed together with a measure called "generalized prejudice."[8]

Despite the influence of *The Authoritarian Personality*, it was widely criticized on both psychometric and theoretical grounds.[9] The complicated nine-factor measure did not hold together statistically, and the Freudian and Marxist theoretical underpinning declined in popularity, especially in North America. Numerous researchers proposed revisions to the construct, but the most lasting revisions would be made by Bob Altemeyer.

Altemeyer revised the theory and measure of authoritarianism in his 1981 book, *Right-Wing Authoritarianism*. He replaced the Marxist and Freudian theoretical base with a more simplistic focus on social learning while selecting and developing new items to produce a statistically coherent measure. He redefined authoritarianism as the covariation of three traits: authoritarian submission, conventionalism, and authoritarian aggression. Authoritarian submission refers to the belief that one should obey and believe authority figures. Conventionalism refers to a belief that the troubles in modern society could be fixed by returning to traditional values. Authoritarian aggression is the belief that those who fail to obey authority or follow these traditional values should be harshly punished.[10]

Altemeyer's right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) scale became one of the best single predictors of ethnic prejudice and support for anti-democratic attitudes. A massive literature has emerged using this scale, and it has consistently linked prejudice, support for harsh punishment, and a wide variety of anti-democratic tendencies.[11] Despite its popularity, or perhaps because of it, Altemeyer's scale has received increasing criticism that the measure is tautological as it includes items that the scale is meant to predict.[12] However, most revisions to Altemeyer's RWA construct and measure are still rooted in Altemeyer's three-factor model of authoritarianism: authoritarian submission, conventionalism, and authoritarian aggression.[13] Because of the lasting popularity of this three-factor theory, I refer to this conception of authoritarianism as Altemeyer's Big Three.

Comparing several scales that independently measure Altemeyer's Big Three, my research with Friedrich Funke has shown that all three factors contributed to ethnocentrism, political intolerance, and a variety of anti-democratic attitudes such as support for warrantless wiretaps, the use of torture for terrorist suspects, suspension of habeas corpus, media censorship, the issuing of national ID cards, and laws

restricting the ability to criticize the president. Of the three factors, authoritarian aggression was reliably the strongest contributor.[14]

Altemeyer's Big Three helps to explain the mechanisms by which existential and epistemic uncertainty produce authoritarian preferences. Those high in authoritarianism find diverse others inherently threatening because diversity challenges conventional beliefs. By supporting strong authoritarian leaders (authoritarian submission) who demand social conformity to traditional norms (conventionalism), they reduce the threat experienced from "others." Aggressively targeting (authoritarian aggression) those who deviate in appearance and practice from these conventional norms is a way to enforce conventional norms. In so doing, authoritarians reduce the sense of existential and epistemic threat through the maintenance of traditional hierarchies and well-defined group boundaries.

A closely related ideological construct to authoritarianism is social dominance orientation (SDO). SDO measures the extent to which a person prefers a hierarchical society over an egalitarian one. Those high in SDO also tend to believe that the hierarchy is inherently just and that groups at the top of the hierarchy are more deserving than the groups at the bottom. Those high in SDO tend to view the world as a zero-sum game where groups compete over limited resources.[15] Those high in SDO embrace a social Darwinist worldview. They perceive the existing social hierarchy as just because they believe it is "natural" for some groups to be superior to others. Trump's repeated statements about the United States losing on trade deals, losing in foreign negotiations, losing at everything appeals directly to the fears of those high in SDO.

These two ideological measures, authoritarianism and SDO, represent the two most powerful predictors of ethnic prejudice today. They also predict support for civil liberty restrictions, the aggressive use of force both at home and abroad, and the adoption and maintenance of factually inaccurate beliefs that justify the use of force.[16] Although they correlate with each other and with measures of political conservatism, they also differ in important ways. While men and women score equally on measures of authoritarianism, men routinely score higher on measures of SDO. While authoritarianism is positively correlated with being religious, SDO is not. Both correlate with an emphasis on safety and security.[17] Despite the well-documented evidence that both predict a wide range of prejudices, research also indicates that they do so for different motivational reasons.

John Duckitt has synthesized these different motivational mechanisms in his dual-process model of prejudice; this model argues that authoritarianism is driven by needs of in-group conformity and cohesion while SDO is driven by a desire to maintain group boundaries.[18] Research using the dual-process model of prejudice has shown that when immigrant groups are portrayed as assimilating into the dominant culture's norms, those high in authoritarianism show reduced levels of prejudice while those high in SDO show increased levels of prejudice. When immigrant groups are portrayed as maintaining

their own culture rather than assimilating, those high in authoritarianism show increased prejudice while those high in SDO show decreased prejudice. The combined effect is a double-bind for immigrants which results in significant prejudice regardless of what they do.

SOCIAL NORMS AND PERCEPTIONS OF THREAT

All animals have necessarily evolved to detect threats in their environment.[19] As such, threat perception is an essential component for understanding our political beliefs and behaviors. For example, researchers have argued that we automatically scan our environment for threats and automatically evaluate outgroups based on their potential threat.[20] Threats can elicit emotions of anger and fear, with anger promoting punishment of threatening groups and fear promoting withdrawal from threatening groups.[21] Not only can threat be a source of prejudice, but it can also be a justification for it.

Prejudice itself can be partitioned into "genuine prejudice" and "expressed prejudice."[22] Genuine prejudice is formed through basic associations that are experienced directly, through the media, or through societal norms. For example, despite the vast majority of peaceful Muslims in the world today, most Americans' exposure to Muslims and Islam is through the lens of terrorism. Through repeated media exposure that links violence and terrorism with Muslims, many Americans experience a sense of threat and danger when they think of Muslims. Genuine prejudices are often suppressed because of societal norms. For example, it is less acceptable today to display explicit racism and sexism than it was 100 years ago. However, this suppressed prejudice is expressed when there is a perceived justification.

There are two mechanisms that encourage the expression of prejudice against others. The first is a social norm indicating that it is acceptable to express the prejudice (therefore, there is no reason to suppress it). The second is that after the prejudice is suppressed, one may later perceive a justification for expressing it. Both of these mechanisms are visible in the United States today.

Crandall and White found that both Trump and Clinton supporters perceived a greater social acceptance of discriminatory speech after Trump was elected in 2016.[23] The election of Trump served as a signal that social norms prohibiting ethnic persecution had shifted. In the words of David Duke, former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, "We are going to fulfill the promises of Donald Trump. That's what we believed in. That's why we voted for Donald Trump, because he said he's going to take our country back."[24]

Trump's statements about Mexicans as criminals and Muslims as inherently dangerous both serve to justify the expression of prejudice. Arguing that immigrants and Muslims are a threat to American values (e.g., Trump claimed Islam hates us) and resources (they are taking our jobs) are ways to appeal to those high in authoritarianism and SDO. Rhetoric emphasizing the threat of specific groups acts as a justification for the expression of prejudice. The election of Trump signaled to many Americans that the

social norms around the expression of prejudice had changed. Trump himself had criticized political correctness, and many of his supporters like that Trump "tells it like it is." For many Americans who have felt self-conscious about their prejudices, Trump communicated that they no longer needed to suppress these prejudices.

For the opportunistic demagogue, arguing that immigrants are a threat to American values and resources is a sure way to appeal both to those high in authoritarianism and to those high in SDO. Such rhetoric increases the expression of prejudice towards immigrants (or anyone perceived as not a "real" American) by these two mechanisms.

HOW DID TRUMP BECOME THE LEADER OF THE REPUBLICAN PARTY?

Evan McMullin, former Central Intelligence Agency operations officer and presidential candidate, described Trump as having "authoritarian tendencies": in McMullin's words, Trump had "questioned judicial independence, threatened the freedom of the press, called for violating Muslims' equal protection under the law," and "also undermined critical democratic norms."[25] Despite, or perhaps because of, these tendencies, Trump became the Republican nominee and ultimately the President.

It is worth briefly reviewing Trump's "authoritarian tendencies" and explaining how they fit ideologically with a growing faction of the Republican Party. For White working-class Americans, Trump's ability to speak to their lost sense of purpose is part of what resonated with them. White working-class Americans often see themselves as economically and culturally under attack. FOX News and other right-wing media outlets amplify this message.

Economically, Trump promised to bring back the jobs that provided a sense of purpose. A major part of Trump's campaign focus was a promise that he would bring back jobs that had been lost in the coal and steel industries. For Fromm, industrialization produced a loss of meaning that promoted authoritarianism. Ironically, Trump's rise today is supported not by industrialization but rather by the crises in meaning created by deindustrialization, as it has resulted in a loss of good-paying jobs for those with high-school degrees. Trump's rhetoric speaks directly to the loss of power and status felt by many White Americans today. Research shows that a negative economic evaluation increased one's likelihood of voting for Trump.[26]

Culturally, many White Americans perceive a sense of threat from the growing cultural diversity within the United States. Different "others" can be perceived as threatening because of perceptions that they will take resources away from your group, undermine cultural values that you hold dear, or might physically be harmful.[27] Considerable research has now shown that racial resentment and anti-immigrant sentiment were predictive of support for Trump.[28] Trump's anti-immigration rhetoric, which has

frequently targeted Muslims, Mexicans, and other groups from Central America, resonates with White Americans who are uncomfortable with a diversifying country.

Trump's rhetoric also echoes Altemeyer's Big Three. His slogan, "Make America Great Again," harkens back to a time when White men held more power simply because of their group membership (conventionalism). At rallies, Trump recalled the good old days when troublemakers would be carried out on stretchers, and he offered to pay the legal fees for anyone who took care of the troublemakers at his rallies (authoritarian aggression). He has also suggested that he alone can fix America's problems and that he alone is the arbiter of truth (authoritarian submission).

Trump's frequent attacks on the media, going so far as to call them the "enemy of the American people" on multiple occasions, is a mainstay of fascist propaganda.[29] For authoritarian power to be effectively deployed, critical voices traditionally dedicated to truth are an inherent threat. Journalists, academics, and scientists are examples of groups who regularly challenge authority in their search for truth. As such, they are logical targets for the authoritarian who demands submission to his preferred fiction.

Trump's messages appeal to those concerned with both in-group conformity and the maintenance of group boundaries. Trump's emphasis on in-group conformity can be seen in how he deals with criticism and his views on multi-culturalism. It is clear that Trump does not welcome criticism. His messages against political correctness are a backlash against the multicultural movement. In the eyes of many Trump supporters, diversity is the enemy. Trump's emphasis on group-boundary enforcement is most concrete in his repeated calls to build a physical wall along the Mexican border. However, his calls to stop Muslim immigration hint at a system for Muslim registration, and claims that "they" might steal the election also enhance group boundaries.

In *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics*, Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan D. Weiler argued that authoritarianism has become the main political divide between Republicans and Democrats in the United States. They reviewed a large body of evidence, arguing that party sorting, the process by which people move from one political party to another, and party purity, the process by which a party becomes more ideologically homogenous, is driven today by authoritarianism. While significant previous data had shown that political polarization was increasing in the United States, Hetherington and Weiler show that authoritarian ideology is at the root of this polarization. Across a range of variables, they demonstrate that those with more authoritarian tendencies are increasingly attracted to the Republican Party and those with lesser authoritarian tendencies are increasingly attracted to the Democratic Party.[30] In other words, party sorting and party purity are being driven by authoritarian ideology. The logical extension of this finding is that the Republican Party will be more likely to nominate an authoritarian presidential candidate. Enter Donald Trump.

Research by Matthew C. MacWilliams demonstrated that authoritarianism predicted support for Trump but not for any of the other Republican candidates during the Republican primary. Fears over terrorism predicted support for Trump and Cruz but not for any of the other Republican candidates. MacWilliams argued, "The movement of authoritarian voters into the Republican Party, rising fears over terrorism, and the terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino created conditions ripe for Trump's rise."[31] In other words, authoritarianism and threat perception are responsible for Trump's rise to power.

It is reasonable to wonder why authoritarian ideology might be more attractive to the political right in the United States. First, it is important to note that authoritarian movements are populist in nature and as such reflect the beliefs and mythologies of a particular culture, time, and place. In order for authoritarian propaganda to be received, it must resonate with the deeply held conventional beliefs of that particular group. For an excellent overview of how these mechanisms have worked in the United States and Europe, see Jason Stanley's book *How Fascism Works*.[32] US and Western European traditions have resulted in a social context where right-wing authoritarianism, but not left-wing authoritarianism, is more suitable. Left-wing authoritarianism appears to be more prominent in Eastern European nations and extremist left-wing groups.[33]

What is it about the US and Western European social contexts that makes them more appealing to right-wing authoritarian ideology? Politics is, to some extent, a debate about which societal values are best and then how to realize those values. Those on the political right and left have different beliefs about what values are inherently moral. Those on the political right, but not the left, believe that in-group loyalty, obedience to authority, and purity are fundamental components of morality.[34] As such, those on the right are going to be more likely to emphasize physical and cultural homogeneity (purity) as well as obedience to those they perceive as in-group authorities.

The conservative focus on in-group loyalty as an important moral dimension makes it especially difficult for Republicans to challenge or criticize Trump. For example, despite the overwhelming evidence that Trump incited the January 6, 2021, assault on the US Capitol, Republicans who voted for impeachment faced harsh criticism from their conservative base because of their lack of loyalty to Trump. This focus on in-group loyalty in conservatives but not in liberals makes authoritarian submission to a strong in-group leader much more likely for Republicans than for Democrats.

UNDERSTANDING THE EROSION OF LIBERAL DEMOCRATIC NORMS

The Paris terrorist attacks of 2015 occurred during the US presidential primaries and were featured heavily in the US news and in commentary by presidential candidates. These events coincided with the Syrian refugee crises in Europe and calls by some to increase the number of Syrian refugees in

the United States. Trump responded to the Paris attacks by suggesting that the United States ban all Muslim immigration and "strongly consider" shutting down mosques.[35]

To capitalize on the combined effects of the Syrian refugee crises and the Paris terrorist attacks on the US electorate, Sam G. McFarland and I quickly assembled a survey and began data collection within ten days of the Paris attack.[36] We presented 602 US participants with questions to assess their beliefs and policy preferences regarding Syrian refugees and a variety of Muslim-related policies, many of which were directly suggested by Trump.

To assess the participants' perceptions of Muslims as threatening, we asked them to respond to the following questions (alternative wording for the two questions shown in parentheses) via a five-point scale anchored at 1 (not at all concerned) and 5 (very concerned):

> When thinking about (Syrian refugees coming to the United States/Muslims living in the United States), how concerned are you that they would . . .
>> 1. be disruptive to the norms and values of American society.
>> 2. be dangerous because they might include potential terrorists.
>> 3. take resources away from Americans in need.

Participants' responses to these threat perception questions about Syrian refugees and Muslims living in the United States correlated at 0.91, indicating that participants failed to perceive them as two separate groups. As stated, Muslims living in the United States would include US citizens, yet our participants appeared to judge Syrian refugees and Muslims living in the United States as one homogenous outgroup. Judgments of Muslims as threatening appeared not to be based on specific concerns about Muslims but rather on participants' high levels of ethnocentrism. In fact, perceptions of Muslims as threatening correlated very strongly ($r = 0.76$) with a measure of generalized prejudice.

We then asked participants to respond to a variety of hypothetical scenarios: First, imagine that, due to rising Islamic terrorism, the US government passed a law requiring all Muslims to register with the government. Almost 20% of participants indicated that they would tell their friends they agreed with the law and would tell police about known unregistered Muslims. Next, we asked participants to imagine that the US government had outlawed Islam. About 10% of respondents indicated they would tell a friend they agreed with the law and tell police about known Muslims. Between 2% and 3% reported that they would personally participate in attacks against Muslims. In our regression models predicting support for policies deliberately targeting Muslims, the strongest unique predictor was perceptions of Muslims as threatening, followed by authoritarianism and then generalized prejudice.

Trump campaigned on banning Muslim immigration to the United States and, shortly after becoming president, issued a ban on immigration from predominantly Muslim countries and immediately implemented it through border patrol. The ban was challenged in the courts, and initially federal judges

argued that it was unconstitutional. In the immediate aftermath of the court rulings, I wondered if Trump, given his "authoritarian tendencies," would acknowledge the court's authority to check executive power. Ultimately, Trump did accept the legal rulings that challenged the ban through the court system.

This turn of events inspired another series of questions testing the role of authoritarianism and threat in undermining democratic norms. If Trump, or another president, refused to acknowledge the courts' ability to check executive power, who would support the president violating the rule of law? Dennis Plane and I created a series of hypothetical scenarios such as the following:

Imagine that someday in the future President Trump signs an executive order banning all Muslim immigration to the United States. Now imagine that this executive order is challenged in court and found to be unconstitutional. However, President Trump insists that the order is legal and must be followed. Please indicate whether you would engage in the following behaviors by using the following scale: 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree.

1) I would tell my friends that it was a good law.

2) I would tell the police about any unregistered Muslims that I knew.

3) I would help hunt down unregistered Muslims and turn them over to the police.

Similar hypothetical scenarios involved a mandatory Muslim registration system, the postponing of presidential elections due to threats from terrorism and voter fraud, and the deportation of Mexican immigrants. Regression analyses showed that only two variables, authoritarianism and threat, were able to account for about half (R^2 between 41% and 60%) of the variance in support for these violations of the rule of law.[37]

In a large sample of 602 participants, authoritarianism and threat perception explained 40% of the variance in support for surveilling mosques in the United States, 51% of the variance in support for a mandatory Muslim registry, and 52% of the variance in support for the Muslim travel ban.

We also sought to test more thoroughly Hetherington and Weiler's party-sorting hypothesis that authoritarianism had become a major partisan divide. While Hetherington and Weiler used a proxy measure of authoritarianism, we found that two well-validated measures of authoritarianism had moderate positive correlations with self-identified conservatism and Republicanism ($r = .51$ to .68). We then wondered how much of the variance in self-identified conservatism could be explained by measures of authoritarianism and perception of "others" as threatening. These two variables accounted for 40% to 52% of the variance in self-identified conservatism across two samples totaling 704 participants. In a smaller sample of 102 participants, these two variables also accounted for 50% of the variance in Trump's job approval rating.

Trump's job approval ratings are further evidence of rising authoritarianism within the Republican Party, as his job approval rating is more polarized than "any other U.S. President in the

modern era of polling."[38] The fact that his approval rating remained high and stable among Republicans, given all of Trump's authoritarian tendencies, is telling. The fact that his approval ratings are more polarized than "any other U.S. President in the modern era" is what we would expect if the partisan divide has increasingly become an authoritarian divide.

On October 22, 2018, during the same week that news broke that prominent Democrats who were frequent targets of Trump's divisive rhetoric had received pipe-bombs in the mail, Trump's job approval rating was 91% among Republicans.[39] That same week saw the largest anti-Semitic act of terror in US history with the attack on a Jewish synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on October 27, 2018. The reason for the attack? The attacker believed that Jews, and specifically George Soros, were funding the caravan of people fleeing violence in South America and walking through Mexico towards the United States. There is no evidence of such funding, yet Trump claimed he wouldn't be surprised if it were true.[40] Despite Trump's demonization of a migrant caravan and hints that prominent Jews might be funding it, Trump's job approval rating among Republicans was virtually unchanged after the Pittsburgh attack.[41]

After losing the election to Joe Biden, Trump repeatedly claimed that the election was stolen. These false claims were repeated by several prominent members of the Republican Party, including Senators Ted Cruz and Josh Hawley.[42] The message they repeated emphasized that Democrats were a threat to US democracy and must be stopped. This elevation of threat signaling by Trump and his followers resulted in the attack on the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, in an apparent attempt to overturn the election. In short, authoritarianism and messages of threat effectively worked together to undermine democratic norms.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Knowing the combined effects of authoritarianism and threat help us better understand the contemporary challenges facing pluralistic democracy, but they outline the problem rather than address solutions. So how do we counter authoritarian ideology and ethnocentricity? One of the most compelling empirical answers to this question is a liberal arts education.

Miles Simpson, in "Authoritarianism and Education: A Comparative Approach," evaluated the relationship between education levels and authoritarian attitudes across several countries and found that, in general, higher levels of education led to lower levels of authoritarianism. However, the effect varied across countries and education level. Primary education did not reduce authoritarianism in Costa Rica and Mexico but did in the United States and Finland. Education began to reduce authoritarianism in secondary education in Costa Rica but not until post-secondary education in Mexico. The impact of education on reducing authoritarian attitudes was strongest in Finland and the United States, leading the author to

conclude that "education will reduce authoritarianism only when the educational system emphasizes cognitive rather than rote learning or is manned by non-authoritarian teachers."[43]

More recent research by Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, Lenka Drazanova, Arem Gulish, and Kathryn Peltier Campbell replicates and extends this work. They evaluated data from the World Values Survey for 2010-2014 and showed that Americans report moderate levels of authoritarianism, with Germany showing the lowest levels and India the highest. Importantly, the negative correlation between authoritarianism and education level was strongest in the United States, demonstrating that there is something different about US education in promoting democratic pluralism over authoritarianism.

Compared to the rest of the world, the United States is unique in its "strong commitment to general education," requirements that focus on the liberal arts. If the emphasis on the liberal arts is causally related to lower levels of authoritarian ideology, then we would expect to see lower levels of authoritarianism in liberal arts majors when compared to other majors. Indeed, this is what the authors found. Specifically, they found that "liberal arts majors (excluding the sciences) are less inclined toward authoritarianism than those who major in either business-related fields or STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics)."[44]

This research by both Simpson and Carnevale et al. demonstrates that what and how we teach matters. Additional years of education is not enough to counter authoritarian ideology; an explicit focus on liberal education is needed. In theory, such an approach can be taken in primary, secondary, and post-secondary education. It can also be taken in business and STEM majors. In short, if we want to preserve pluralistic democracy, we must explicitly foster such capacities across our educational systems and across majors. Liberal arts institutions do this most explicitly.

To be clear, "liberal" here does not refer to the opposite of "conservative," as a modern political interpretation might imply. Instead, "liberal" refers to the Latin word "liber," for free. According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), the premier advocacy organization for liberal education in America, "A LIBERAL EDUCATION IS A LIBERATING EDUCATION IN THAT IT FREES THE MIND [emphasis in original] to seek after the truth unencumbered by dogma, ideology, or preconceived notions. A liberally educated person can think for himself or herself, is both broad- and open-minded, and is, therefore, less susceptible to manipulation or prejudice."[45] The above description emphasizes anti-authoritarian and pro-democratic principles such as independent and critical thinking as well as resistance to propaganda and prejudice.

Liberal education includes a general understanding of how knowledge is created, a consideration of ethical and social responsibilities, an understanding of different cultural traditions, and reflection on the values necessary for a peaceful and pluralistic democracy. More specific formulations of the liberal arts

can be found in AAC&U's *Essential Learning Outcomes* as well as in Martha Nussbaum's writings, which detail capacities necessary for citizenship.[46] In short, liberal education is democratic education.

CONCLUSION

In the aftermath of Nazi atrocities, the emerging field of political psychology sought to understand why some individuals find antidemocratic ideologies, specifically those that target certain ethnic or religious groups, appealing. A significant body of research has demonstrated that individual measures of authoritarian ideology and threat help to explain who is likely to find antidemocratic messages persuasive. Because of their intolerance of existential and epistemic uncertainties, authoritarians are threatened by those who challenge traditional social norms. It is authoritarian ideology and threat that make people susceptible to the propaganda and prejudices that undermine democratic norms.

Perhaps more disturbing than an authoritarian president is the possibility that the Republican Party will further embrace authoritarian ideology. While pluralistic democracy in the United States withstood the pressures of a president with authoritarian tendencies, it is much less likely to withstand a Republican Party that fully embraces authoritarianism. Although Trump was impeached by the House of Representatives, he was not convicted in the Senate. Rather than repudiate Trump for his authoritarian tendencies, the Republican Party has chosen to repudiate anyone who challenged Trump.

The V-Dem Institute collects a variety of measures to rate the illiberalism of both countries and political parties. It has found that the Republican Party has moved dramatically in an illiberal direction under Trump and, as of 2018, was "far more illiberal than almost all other governing parties in democracies."[47] If Republicans continue to pander to Trump and his authoritarian loyalists, then January 6 represents a sign of what is likely to become more common in US politics: right-wing political extremism and violence.

The role of liberal education is unique for its cultivation of democratic pluralism. It is liberal education, with its focus on citizenship and educational breadth, that has the greatest empirical impact on countering the development of authoritarian ideology and ethnocentrism today. A pluralistic and democratic future is only secured by continuous investment in widely available education that deliberately cultivates pro-democracy norms.

NOTES

1.   G. M. Gilbert, *Nuremberg Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Company, 1947), pp. 278-279.

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