

## **The Authoritarian-Conservatism Nexus**

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The authors of *The Authoritarian Personality* famously posited a psychological affinity between the authoritarian personality syndrome and politically conservative ideology. Seven decades later, we evaluate the empirical evidence bearing on this hypothesis. We conclude that: (a) there is a large body of evidence, including data from six continents and many different measures, documenting a positive association between authoritarianism and right-wing conservatism; (b) the association is observed in studies with ideologically neutral measures of authoritarianism, indicating that it is not a methodological artifact; (c) there is still no convincing counter-evidence that authoritarianism is equally prevalent on the left and right in Western societies, despite many attempts to procure such evidence; and (d) the authoritarian-conservatism nexus possesses both context-dependent and independent features. In summary, the evidence of an affinity between authoritarianism and conservatism is strong, although more research focusing on specific aspects of authoritarianism, ideological subtypes, and contextual moderators is recommended.

## Highlights

- We review evidence of a psychological association between authoritarianism and right-wing conservative ideology
- The evidence is based on seven decades of research, on six continents, with multiple measures of authoritarianism and ideology
- The association holds up when ideologically neutral measures of authoritarianism are used
- There is no convincing counterevidence that authoritarianism is equally prevalent on the left and right in Western societies
- The authoritarian-conservatism nexus possesses both context-dependent and context-independent features

*Authoritarianism was conceptualized to involve submission to established authorities, who could be anyone. But it turns out that people who have “conservative” leanings tend to be more authoritarian than anyone else. (Altemeyer, as cited in [1], p. 50)*

There are astonishingly few works of social and personality psychology that have remained part of the scientific conversation for seven decades or more. *The Authoritarian Personality* by Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford [2] is one such work. The enduring relevance of Adorno et al.’s work may be attributed in part to the richness of its theoretical framework, the density of penetrating insights it contains, and—less happily—the fact that its focal phenomenon, authoritarianism, remains with us. One can only hope that, in another six or seven decades, the problem of authoritarianism will have receded considerably, if not vanished completely from human society. However, those of us whose vocation it is to acquaint ourselves with the dark as well as the sunnier sides of human nature know that such a hope is almost surely in vain.

### **Characteristics of the Authoritarian Personality**

Adorno et al. [2] originally identified nine specific features of the “authoritarian syndrome,” namely authoritarian aggression, authoritarian submission, support for conventional values, mental rigidity and a proclivity to engage in stereotypical thinking, a preoccupation with toughness and power, cynicism about human nature, sexual inhibition, a reluctance to engage in introspection, and a tendency to project undesirable traits onto others. For better or worse, contemporary researchers have come to focus on three, or sometimes even fewer, of the original nine characteristic features of the authoritarian personality [3-

9]. Most prominently, Altemeyer [10-12] has emphasized authoritarian aggression, submission, and conventionalism. This remains the dominant conception of authoritarianism in psychology today.

The original set of items that Altemeyer developed to measure “right-wing authoritarianism” (RWA) were intended to load simultaneously on all three factors. Subsequently, other researchers have created new subscales to measure each of the authoritarian aggression, submission, and conventionalism factors separately [5, 13\*\*, 14]. It is a testament to Adorno et al.’s [2] theoretical intuitions about the authoritarian personality “syndrome” that scores on the three distinct factors are substantially correlated with one another in most countries.

### **An Ideological Asymmetry in Authoritarianism**

The theoretical analysis of authoritarianism by Adorno et al. [2] and others who have followed in their footsteps [10-12, 14-17] implies that individuals with an authoritarian disposition are drawn disproportionately to politically conservative ideologies.<sup>1</sup> Evidence consistent with this hypothesis has accumulated over several decades. For instance, Adorno and colleagues found that authoritarianism was robustly correlated with political-economic conservatism, operationalized as support

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<sup>1</sup> Adorno et al. [2] distinguished between “genuine” and “pseudo” (or “reactionary”) conservatives, arguing that both types exhibit conventionalism and submission to legitimate authority figures whereas only the latter reject democratic norms, values, and traditions. Whereas “genuine” conservatives subscribe to individualism and equality of opportunity, pseudoconservatives prefer “a rigidly stratified society in which there is a minimum of economic mobility and in which the ‘right’ groups are in power, the outgroups subordinate” (p. 182). According to Adorno and colleagues, it is the pseudo-conservative who is especially susceptible to fascistic tendencies.

for laissez-faire capitalism and “Big Business” and opposition to labor unions and social welfare provisions (see also [18]). Furthermore, scores on various measures of authoritarianism have predicted support for every Republican presidential candidate in the United States from Barry Goldwater (vs. Lyndon Johnson) in 1964 to Donald Trump (vs. Hilary Clinton) in 2016 [19-30].

Although much of the early research on authoritarianism focused on the United States, subsequent work has provided ample evidence that the association between authoritarianism and right-wing orientation holds up in other contexts as well. Authoritarianism has been found to predict right- (vs. left-) wing beliefs and preferences in Australia [31], Austria [32], Belgium [33], Finland [34], France [35, 36], Israel [37-39], Latvia [40], the Netherlands [33], New Zealand [41], Sweden [38, 40, 42], and the United Kingdom [43-45].

In an analysis on nationally representative data from 19 democratic countries included in the World Values Survey, Napier and Jost [18] observed that several characteristics of the authoritarian personality—namely, conventionalism, obedience to authority, moral rigidity, and cynicism—contributed significantly and independently to right- (vs. left-) wing self-placement and opposition to governmental redistribution of income. Similarly, Vargas-Salfate and colleagues [46\*] found that RWA was associated with national identification, system justification (defined as the tendency to defend and bolster the societal status quo, see [47]) and conservative (vs. liberal) self-placement in an aggregate analysis of respondents from 19 countries in Europe, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas.

## Measurement Issues

Ever since the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality*, a subset of scholars have energetically contested the notion that there is an authoritarian-conservative nexus. Some have argued, largely on the basis of historical events in the Soviet Union, Cuba, and other totalitarian socialist systems, that authoritarianism—as a psychological construct—is *equally* compatible with leftist and rightist ideological manifestations (e.g., [48-51]). One problem with this view is that it fails to distinguish clearly between the characteristics of individual personalities and social systems.

Another issue concerns the presence of content overlap between measures of authoritarianism and political orientation [7, 9, 52, 53]. To the extent that there is such overlap—and in some cases there surely is—correlations between authoritarianism and conservative (or right-wing) orientation could be artificially inflated. For example, Altemeyer's [10] RWA scale contains items such as "You have to admire those who challenged the law and the majority's view by protesting for women's abortion rights, for animal rights, or to abolish school prayer" (reverse-scored) and "God's laws about abortion, pornography and marriage must be strictly followed before it is too late, and those who break them must be strongly punished". These items conflate authoritarian attitudes with conservative positions on specific issues, such as women's rights, abortion, and marriage equality. This content overlap could produce a spurious correlation between authoritarianism and conservatism.

Recently, Conway, Houck, Gornick, and Repke [54] proposed a new scale to

measure “left-wing authoritarianism” (LWA). By rewriting RWA items so that they would be more attractive to liberals and progressives in the U.S., these researchers repeated and even exacerbated methodological problems associated with earlier versions of the RWA scale. In particular, they deliberately confounded authoritarian inclinations and support for liberal (as opposed to conservative) opinions and groups in society. The LWA scale includes items such as: “Progressive ways and liberal values show the best way of life”; “It’s always better to trust the judgment of the proper authorities in science with respect to issues like global warming and evolution than to listen to the noisy rabble-rousers in our society who are trying to create doubts in people’s minds”; and “There is absolutely nothing wrong with Christian fundamentalist camps designed to create a new generation of fundamentalists” (reverse-scored). Given that the items refer explicitly to liberal causes, such as environmentalism, and conservative causes, such as religious fundamentalism, it is hardly surprising that their endorsement is strongly correlated with political orientation in the expected manner [54, 55].

But there are other problems as well. In adapting items from the RWA scale Conway and colleagues [54] added more barrels to existing items, many of which were already multi-barreled. At the same time, they presented no evidence concerning the factor structure or validity of the LWA scale. When Hoffarth and colleagues [56] administered the LWA scale to new convenience samples of Americans, they discovered that LWA scores were *negatively* correlated with intolerance of ambiguity and the endorsement of authoritarian attitudes about child



rearing. Conway et al.'s [54] instrument may tap into liberal concerns (and attitudes about epistemological and moral relativism), but there is no evidence that it measures authoritarianism *per se*.

Other research programs have instead focused on developing (and validating) more psychometrically sound and ideologically neutral measures of authoritarianism. For instance, Duckitt et al. [14] reworked Altemeyer's items to remove content overlap between authoritarianism, on one hand, and conservatism and religiosity, on the other (e.g., "Our leaders should be obeyed without question" and "What our country really needs is a tough, harsh dose of law and order"). Dunwoody and Funke [13\*\*] likewise created new items that were devoid of conservative and religious language (e.g., "We should believe what our leaders tell us" and "Strong force is necessary against threatening groups"). Studies employing these scales confirm the existence of an authoritarian-conservatism nexus in the U.S., Australia, and the U.K. [13\*\*, 57, 58\*\*].

Furthermore, authoritarianism, when measured in ideologically neutral ways, predicts support for right-wing parties in Israel and the U.S. [14, 58\*\*] and preferences for Republican candidates like Donald Trump and Ted Cruz over Democratic rivals such as Hilary Clinton and Bernie Sanders in recent U.S. presidential elections [21, 26, 30, 57, 58\*\*, 59]. Dunwoody and colleagues provided especially useful comparisons of different measures of authoritarianism. They found that the newer, more ideologically neutral authoritarianism scales and the original RWA scale were robustly—and approximately equally—correlated with

conservative self-placement (with  $r$ s ranging from .38 to .60 [13\*\*]) and Republican (vs. Democratic) partisanship (with  $r$ s ranging from .51 to .62 [58\*\*]).

Studies using other authoritarianism instruments that are not obviously confounded with political orientation have produced similar results. Some studies have employed a simple child rearing measure about the importance of obedience (e.g., “Obedience and respect for authority are the most important virtues children should learn”). Although this measure has some methodological shortcomings [60, 61], it has been included in the American National Election Studies, because it is thought to be devoid of political content [4, 6, 9]. Azevedo et al. [62\*] found that scores on the child rearing measure predicted social, economic, and overall conservatism in a large sample of American respondents (with  $r$ s ranging from .16 to .27).

Even more convincingly, Sprong et al. [63\*\*] conducted a cross-national investigation of the desire for strong leadership in 28 countries from North and South America, Western and Eastern Europe, South and North Asia, the Middle East, and Oceania. Items used to measure this construct (e.g., “Our country needs a strong leader right now”) contained no specific ideological referents. Nevertheless, the desire for strong leadership was indeed correlated with right- (vs. left-) wing self-placement at  $r = .20$ , and this correlation was robust in a multilevel model ( $r = .17$ ) that adjusted for numerous individual-level and country-level characteristics (e.g., respondent sex, subjective and objective indicators of inequality, democracy scores, and homicide rates).

## Do the Authorities Matter?

Another research program on obedience to “moral authorities” [64] has suggested that the nature of the authorities in question plays a critical role for the association between authoritarian and ideological dispositions. Data from U.S. convenience samples suggested that liberal (vs. conservative) self-placement was positively associated with the perceived moral goodness of obedience to so-called “liberal authorities” (“an environmentalist” and “a civil rights activist”), but was negatively associated with the perceived moral goodness of obedience toward “conservative” authorities (“traditions”, “religious authority”, “commanding officer”, “police”, and “the law”). The researchers concluded, on the basis of this evidence, that liberals and conservatives are equally obedient to authority, but they are obedient to different authorities.

One important problem is that the “liberal authorities” in this research program were all political activists (such as environmentalists). Activism bears no relationship to the conception of authority developed by Adorno et al. [2], Altemeyer [10-12], or other researchers of authoritarianism. In fact, it is reasonable to doubt that activists have any “authority” in the relevant sense at all (although they obviously can have more or less credibility). The “conservative” authorities studied in this research [64], on the other hand, did hold positions of legitimate authority within the social system: police officers, religious leaders, and “the law.” The findings from this research program, therefore, are entirely consistent with the analysis by Adorno et al. [2]: conservatives were more likely than liberals to defer to recognized authority

figures in society, and they were less likely to respond favorably to activists who were challenging the status quo.

### **Does the “System” Matter?**

Although there is compelling cross-national evidence for an authoritarian-conservative nexus, this does not mean that there are no contextual moderators that affect the relationship between authoritarianism and ideology. It does not follow, in other words, that conservatives *in every time and place* will be more authoritarian than other citizens. In fact, we know that some of the ideological correlates of authoritarianism vary substantially according to societal context.

The most obvious example concerns economic ideology: whereas authoritarianism (still) predicts strong support for capitalism and hostility toward socialism in Western societies (e.g., [2, 18, 62\*]), it has sometimes been found to predict support for socialism and hostility toward capitalism in formerly Communist societies, such as Russia, Ukraine, Poland, and Romania [65-68]. Furthermore, in societal contexts in which governmental authorities take a strong stance in support of ethnic diversity and multiculturalism—such as Singapore, Indonesia, and the Philippines—authoritarianism may be associated with more *positive* attitudes toward out-groups [69-71]. In France, authoritarianism (measured in terms of child rearing attitudes) was found to be negatively associated with system justification, although the two variables are positively correlated in many other contexts [72]. Thus, the “system” (or societal context) clearly matters.

Do findings such as these pose a fundamental challenge to the notion that, all

other things being equal, there is a psychological affinity between authoritarianism and right-wing conservatism? We think not. The reason is that authoritarianism— from the very start— was conceptualized in terms of certain context-dependent features, such as conventionalism [10, 11], obedience to existing authority figures [18], and support for “the prevailing politico-economic and authority” [2].

Conventions and prevailing authority figures come and go, insofar as they are yoked to the fates of social, economic, and political systems or regimes.

Conservative ideology is also context-dependent, at least in part, insofar as it involves traditionalism, resistance to social change, and a commitment to the status quo, the specifics of which can vary considerably across time and place (see [73]). As Adorno et al. [2] pointed out, political conservatism in the U.S. is a quintessentially system-justifying ideology:

Perhaps the definitive component of conservatism is an attachment, on the surface at least, to “things as they are,” to the prevailing social organization and ways. Related to the idea that “what is, is right,” is a tendency to idealize existing authority and to regard “the American Way” as working very well. Social problems tend either to be ignored or to be attributed to extraneous influences rather than to defects intrinsic in the existing social structure. One way of rationalizing chronic problems is to make them “natural” . . . Or, as a prominent ultra-conservative radio commentator observed recently: “There is nothing wrong with our American system. It is as good as it ever was, but we must do all we can in the New Year to get rid of the charlatans, fakers, and

agitators who are responsible for so many problems.” It is clear from the other speeches of this commentator that his “charlatans” are for the most part leaders of the labor movement or of liberal political groupings—men who, in his eyes, threaten the existing order . . . To be “liberal,” on the other hand, one must be able actively to criticize existing authority. The criticisms may take various forms, ranging from mild reforms (e.g., extension of government controls over business) to complete overthrow of the *status quo*. (pp. 153-4)

Consistent with these observations, conservatism and authoritarianism are both positively associated with system justification in the U.S. [62\*, 74]—and in many other countries as well [47]. In fact, the concept of system justification brings into prominence the context-dependent nature of ideological motivation: some individuals are more strongly motivated than others to defend, bolster, and rationalize “things as they are,” that is, the social, economic, and political institutions and arrangements on which we all depend. All other things being equal, this should make them more conservative in the sense of maintaining the status quo and more deferential to authority figures sanctioned by the existing regime.

And yet the contents of authoritarian and conservative ideologies are not entirely context-dependent. In addition to conventionalism and obedience to prevailing authorities, authoritarianism involves a preoccupation with toughness and power; rigid, stereotypical thinking; cynicism about human nature; aggression; and a tendency to project undesirable traits onto socially sanctioned scapegoats [2, 75]. Likewise, right-wing conservatism does not *merely* involve support for the status

quo. Another core element of conservatism is the legitimation of social and economic forms of inequality [15, 16, 73]. Therefore, there are system-specific features of authoritarianism (e.g., obedience to prevailing authorities) and system-general features of conservatism (e.g., acceptance of economic inequality) as well as system-general features of authoritarianism (e.g., aggression) and system-specific features of conservatism (e.g., resistance to changes to the existing social order). These complexities mean that there are potential sources of contextual variability in the authoritarian-conservatism nexus. An analysis that takes into account the interplay between personal and societal factors is necessary to explain why (a) conservative rightists are generally higher on authoritarianism than liberal leftists, and (b) there is contextual variability in the association between authoritarianism and conservatism.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Although seventy years have passed since the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality*, many of the book's key insights remain valid and, indeed, indispensable when it comes to understanding modern society. With respect to American politics, many observers are disturbed by the rise of authoritarianism under the presidency of Donald Trump, whose political rallies are filled with hostility toward liberals and racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities. Nationalism and hatred of immigrants are making a serious comeback thanks to far-right parties in Germany, Austria, Italy, Hungary, Poland, and many other countries in Eastern and Western Europe. Right-wing authoritarianism is also ascendant in Israel, Turkey, India, the Philippines, and Brazil, among other places.

These facts, and the psychological evidence we have reviewed in this article, sustain rather impressively Adorno et al.'s [2] insightful analysis of the "interconnection between these two ideologies [of conservatism and authoritarianism] and the difficulty of separating them" (p. 180). Still, after several decades of research and scores of determined attempts to produce evidence against the notion that an affinity exists between authoritarianism and right-wing conservatism, we know of no compelling data that seriously undermines Adorno et al.'s [2] argument.

Of course, the usual qualifications apply. It remains true that not all conservatives are authoritarians. Those who are both are not only conventional but also "highly *submissive* to established authority and highly *aggressive* against sanctioned targets" [11] (p. 8). Conversely, not all authoritarians are right-leaning, but it appears that the majority still are in Western democratic societies (e.g., [11, 12, 13\*\*, 14, 18, 30, 57, 58\*\*, 62\*, 76, 77])—some seven decades after Adorno et al. [2] supposed that they would be.

The relationship between authoritarianism and conservatism is not invariant with respect to contextual factors either. The nature of the prevailing social system clearly matters [65-72]. Political engagement likely plays a decisive role in transforming authoritarian predispositions into full-fledged ideological commitments [6, 77, 78]. Furthermore, the connection between authoritarianism and political ideology is known to vary according to specific facets of authoritarianism and ideology, as we have noted above [14, 26, 30, 34, 79]. No doubt a more



comprehensive understanding of the authoritarian-conservatism nexus will result from additional research focusing on contextual moderators.

In conclusion, it seems to us that the stubborn correlation between authoritarianism and right-wing conservatism remains deeply deserving of the political psychologist's attention. If there is indeed an "elective affinity" between authoritarianism and conservatism—and our review of the evidence clearly suggests that there is—then society would be better served by social scientists who take seriously and seek to explain such an affinity than by those who are tempted to explain it away as a semantic artifact or as something that is so historically and culturally transient as to be epiphenomenal. A clear-eyed appraisal of the social and psychological forces that gather and dispel ideological precipitates such as authoritarianism and right-wing extremity provides the best hope we have for predicting, navigating, and, indeed, intervening when it comes to the harshest of social climates.

### **Conflict of interest statement**

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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The authors developed a new set of items to measure three facets of authoritarianism (submission, conventionalism, and aggression) in order to get rid of any remnants of ideological or religious content in previous measures of authoritarianism. They report positive correlations between authoritarianism and conservative (vs. liberal) self-placement, political intolerance, anti-democratic attitudes, and numerous other related constructs in the United States for both their new measures and older measures of authoritarianism. These findings are important because they suggest that the link between authoritarianism and conservatism is not a methodological artifact stemming from content overlap.

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This paper reports positive associations (within a multilevel framework) between right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, system justification, national identification, and conservative (vs. liberal) self-placement across representative datasets from 19 countries spanning five different continents. These findings suggest that the affinity between authoritarianism and conservatism is not limited to the United States or other Western nations.

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