

The Psychology of Authoritarianism

Luke Galen, Ph.D.
Department of Psychology
Grand Valley State University

- I. What is an authoritarian? Definitions and related constructs.
- II. Who and how many?
- III. Manifestations and characteristics
- IV. Situational activation and triggers
- V. Summary and implications

“Authoritarian(ism)” can refer to several things.

Talk is NOT about:

“Politician X is ‘An Authoritarian’”

“Country has shifted towards...”

“This policy is authoritarian.”

Rather, who are the followers...

Personality style

Individual characteristics

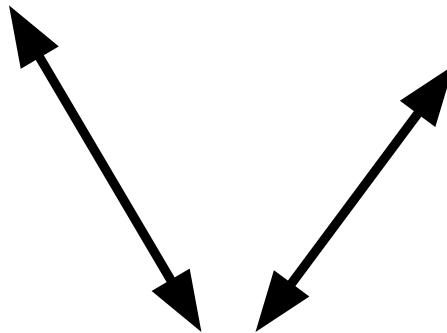
Predispositions

Motivations

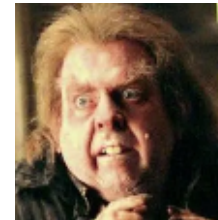
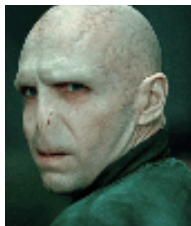
Situations that appeal to preferences?

Rather than leaders:

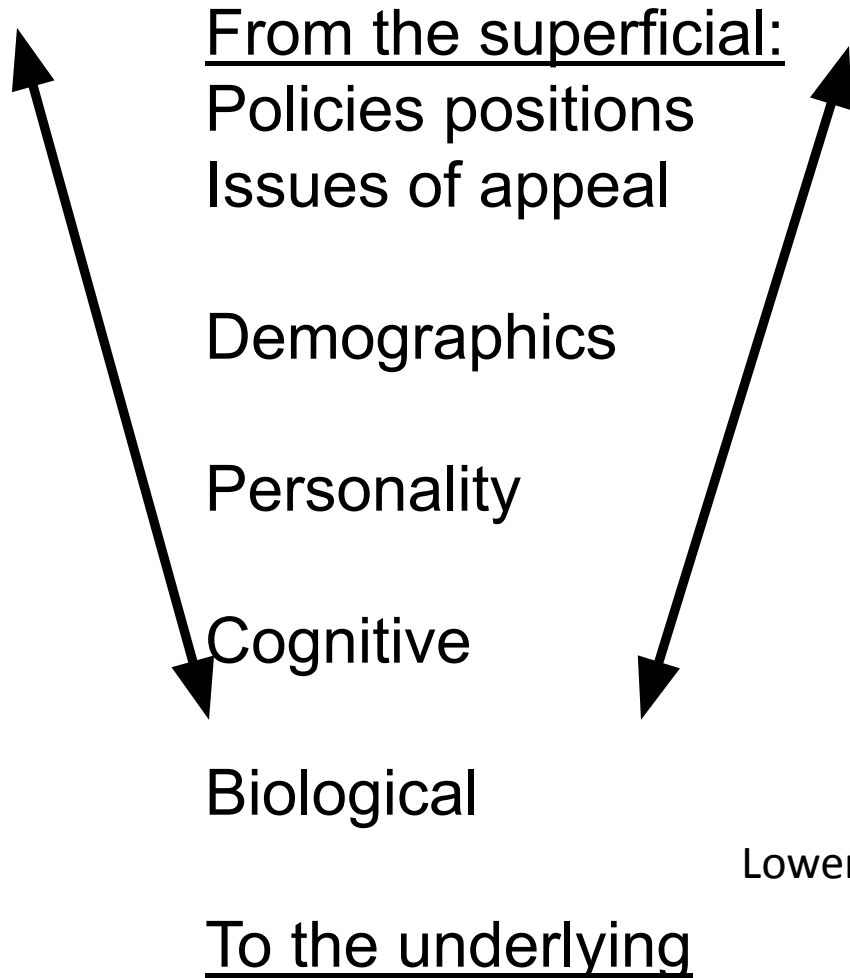
Followers:



Authoritarianism



Authoritarianism as a trait: depends on level of analysis



But.... Traits interact with situational activation and increased salience: "X can shift people.."



Why should we care about authoritarianism?

Greater:

Prejudice,

Ethnocentrism

Anti-democratic attitudes,

Political intolerance,

Political extremism,

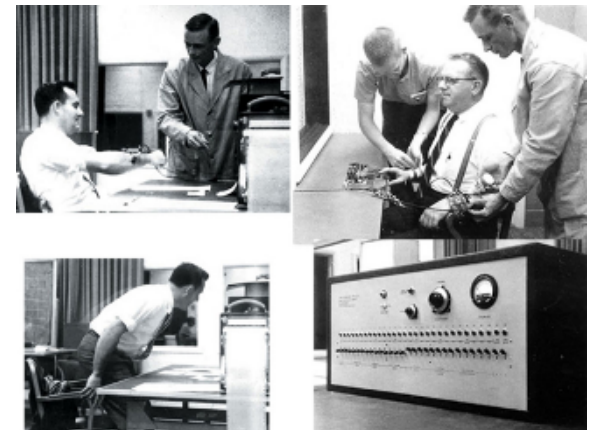
Nationalism,

Militarism

Support autocratic leadership

- justify illegal, repressive actions

Obedience to authority: Milgram



Elms & Milgram, 1966

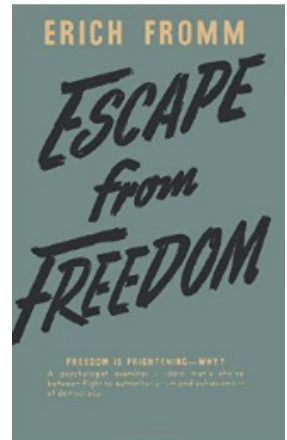
Psychoanalytic theories “response to internal threat”

Erich Fromm 1941

Freedom brings anxiety, alienation; many relinquish it.

Sadistic wishes: control others to impose order

Masochistic wishes: submit to a superior person or idea.



Theodor Adorno 1950

Harsh parenting causes children to feel anger; yet fear disapproval or punishment. Instead: identify with and idolize authority figures

F (facism) scale:

Adherence to **conventional** values.

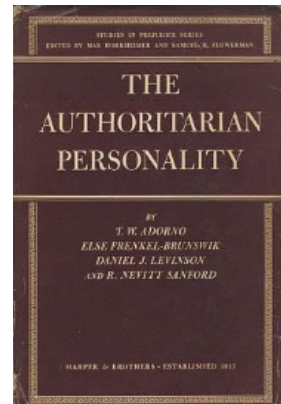
Submission towards ingroup authority figures.

Aggression against value violators.

“The true American way of life is disappearing so fast that force may be necessary to preserve it.”

Criticisms:

Tautology/ redescription: social or ideological attitudes, not underlying personality,



Contemporary approaches

Bob Altemeyer “Enemies of Freedom”

Authoritarianism:

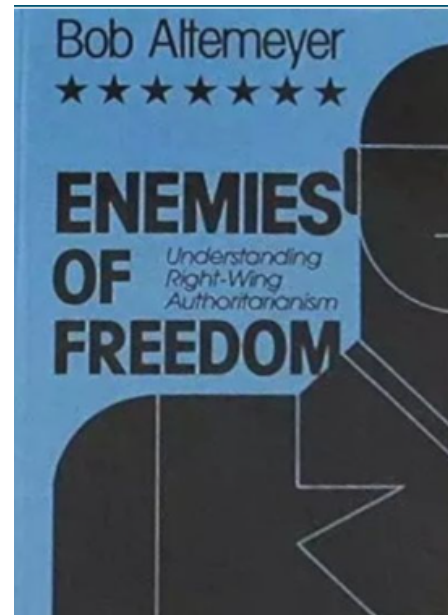
- 1) **Submission**/ obedience to authority,
- 2) **Aggression** against outgroups
- 3) **Conventionalism** (vs. diversity)

“Right Wing Authoritarian” (RWA) scale:

“Our country will be great if we honor the ways of our forefathers, do what the authorities tell us to do, and get rid of the “rotten apples”..

Vs.

“Our country needs free thinkers who have the courage to defy traditional ways, even if this upsets many people”



Current conceptualization (Dunwoody & Funke)

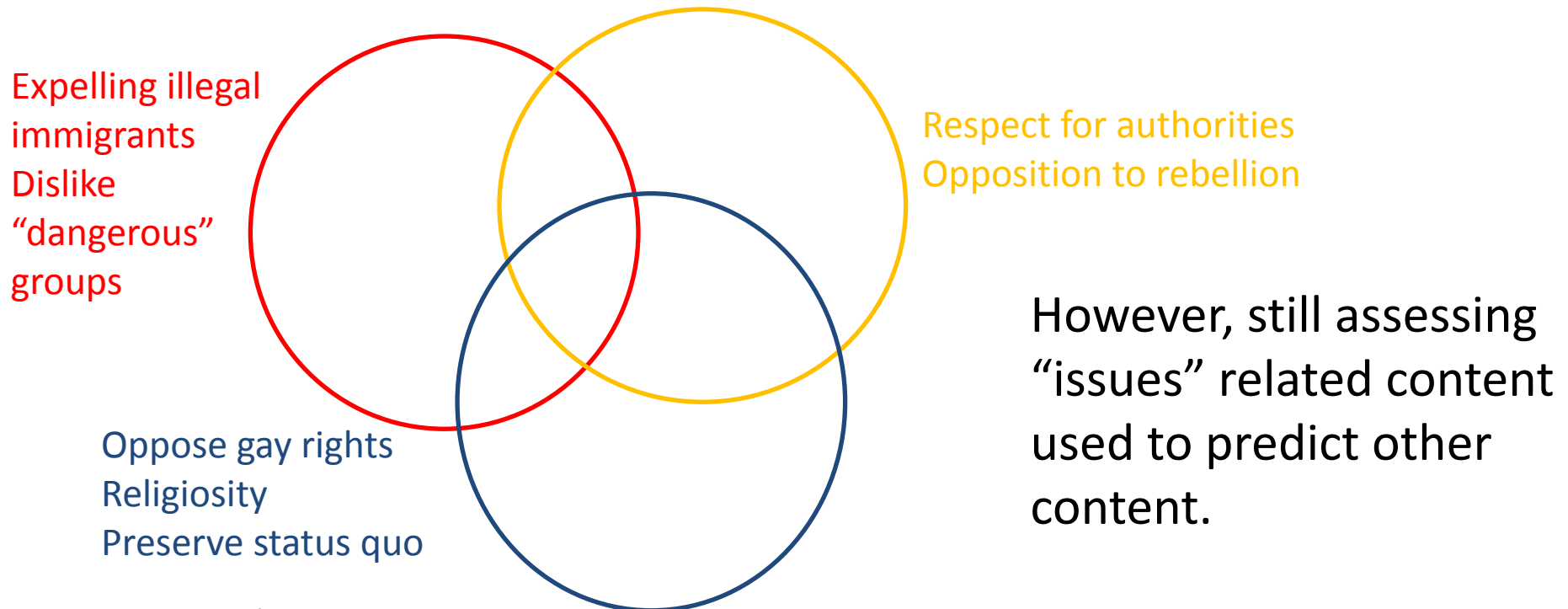
Aggression-Submission-Conventionalism.

“Strong force is necessary against threatening groups”

“Our leaders know what is best for us”

“People should respect social norms”

Separate facets predict.....



However, still assessing
“issues” related content
used to predict other
content.

Predisposition to authoritarianism: **Child rearing beliefs**

“Is it more important for a child to be/ have”:

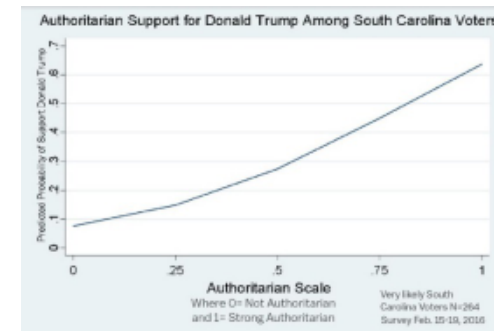
Independence	or	Respect for elders
Self-reliance	or	Obedience
Curiosity	or	Good manners
Considerate	or	Well-behaved
Free-spirited	or	Polite
Imaginative	or	Orderly
Adaptable	or	Disciplined
Open-minded	or	Loyal



Childrearing Beliefs Were Best Predictor of Trump Support

A poll with four weird questions helps explain Trump's surprising victory.

Updated Feb 08, 2016



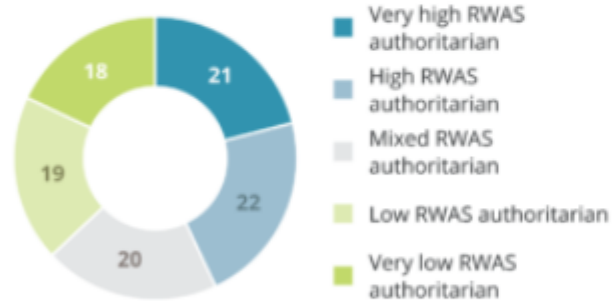
Tucker Carlson oct. 23, 2024: “Strict/ scary Dad” speech:
“when dad gets home, you know what he says? ...you’re getting a vigorous spanking because you’ve been a bad girl.

II. Who and how many? The PRRI 2024 survey

1. Altemeyer's Right Wing Authoritarian scale
2. Child rearing scale
3. Christian Nationalism scale

FIGURE 2. Right-Wing Authoritarianism Groups

Percent who qualify as:



Demographic profile:

Republican vs. Dem

Less education vs. college

Older vs. young

Evang. Protestant vs. unaffiliated

FIGURE 3. Child-Rearing Scale Groups

Percent who qualify as:



PRRI survey continued....

Of those Low on RWAS

Of those **Very High or High on RWAS**

4%	'True American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country	28%
16%	"The final battle between good and evil is upon us, and Christians should stand firm with the full armor of God,"	70%
24%	"America is in Danger of Losing its Culture and Identity"	82%
7%	"A Woman's Vocation as a Wife and Mother "	40%

9%	Immigrants Entering the Country Illegally are Poisoning the Blood of Our Country	59%
----	--	-----

“Rule by **strong leader** or military would be good way to govern”

% who say rule by a strong leader or the military would be a good way to govern their country, among those on the ideological ...



Less likely to support:

- Fair judiciary
- Gender equality
- Regular elections
- Free speech
- Free press/internet
- Free opposition parties

Correlates with:

- Political right
- Europe: populist parties
- Lower income.

Explains U.S. party “polarization” shift over 20th century:
Parties were heterogeneous on authoritarianism. They have “purified”.

High authoritarian

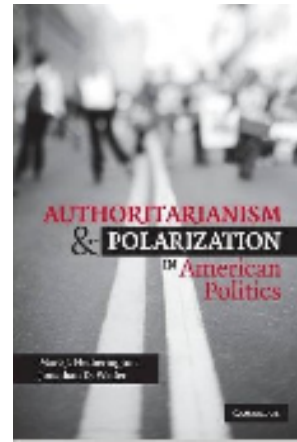
Now

Democrat/ Republican

Then



Low authoritarian



1992, authoritarians scored 7% higher vote toward Republican.
2004 difference between high and non-authoritarians: 20%.
2016 Auth. Aggression facet: Trump from other Republican candidates

<https://prri.org/research/one-leader-under-god-the-connection-between-authoritarianism-and-christian-nationalism-in-america/>

III. Manifestations and characteristics

Associated “mid level” psych traits.

Belief in a dangerous world: world is a scary place

Social dominance: prefer social hierarchy (anti-egalitarian)

System justification: Rationalize status quo as legitimate.

Closed to experience vs. (Openness to experience): trait marked **traditionalism** vs. curious, unconventional.



Epistemic and cognitive underpinnings:

Authoritarian traits associated with:

Impaired strategic information processing Zmigrod et al., 2021. e.g.,
memory capacity, planning, high-order strategies

Cognitive inflexibility: Low adaptability to changes Zmigrod et al., 2018.
e.g., sorting task rules (persisting rather than switching)

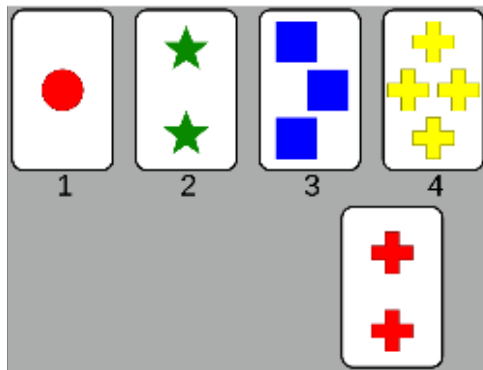
Greater dogmatism: Views do not easily change

Poor belief updating:

e.g., Initial information (non political, e.g., urban myths)
followed by feedback (“previous info. was incorrect”). Retesting
1 week later: high authoritarians less likely to update beliefs

Sinclair et al. 2020

Sum authoritarians are: cognitively rigid, simplistic.

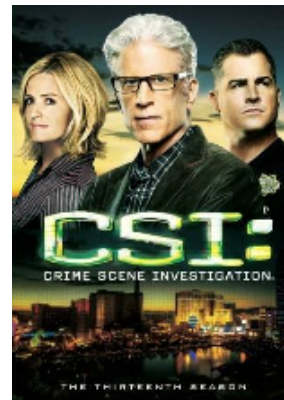
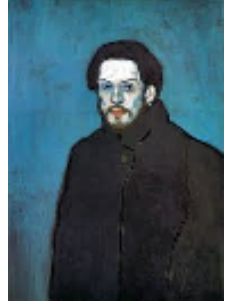


Wisconsin Card Sort Task

Epistemic needs: Clarity and Closure

Conservatives prefer:

- Art: **simplicity and realism** as opposed to **complexity and abstractions** (Wilson et al. 1973).
- Humor: **Puns** as opposed to **unexpected incongruity** (Wilson 1990).
- **Familiar foods and music**
- **Poetry that rhymes**
- **Novels that come to closure** (Neiman 2012).
- Complexity requires **greater cognitive effort** than **certainty, simplicity, order, and managed threat**.
- In sum: **Threatened by ambiguity and uncertainty**. Not just topical ambiguity (e.g., morality, gender roles) but also non-topical



Genetic Factors (Ludeke et al., 2013)



Studied twins
separated at birth
and raised apart.

Conservatism

Authoritarian

Religiosity

Obedience to Traditional Authority

Underlying
Genetic Trait

Conspiracy theories, overclaiming knowledge

Overclaiming knowledge: right wing extremist voting predicted by high self-perceived understanding yet decreased actual knowledge Van Prooijen & Krouwel 2020.

Conspiratorial thinking: extreme conservatives > extreme liberals (distrust officialdom and paranoid ideation). Van der Linden et al. 2021

Pseudoscience (woo-woo, parapsychology, quack medicine). Reject scientific consensus as “from the outgroup”. Fasce et al., 2020.



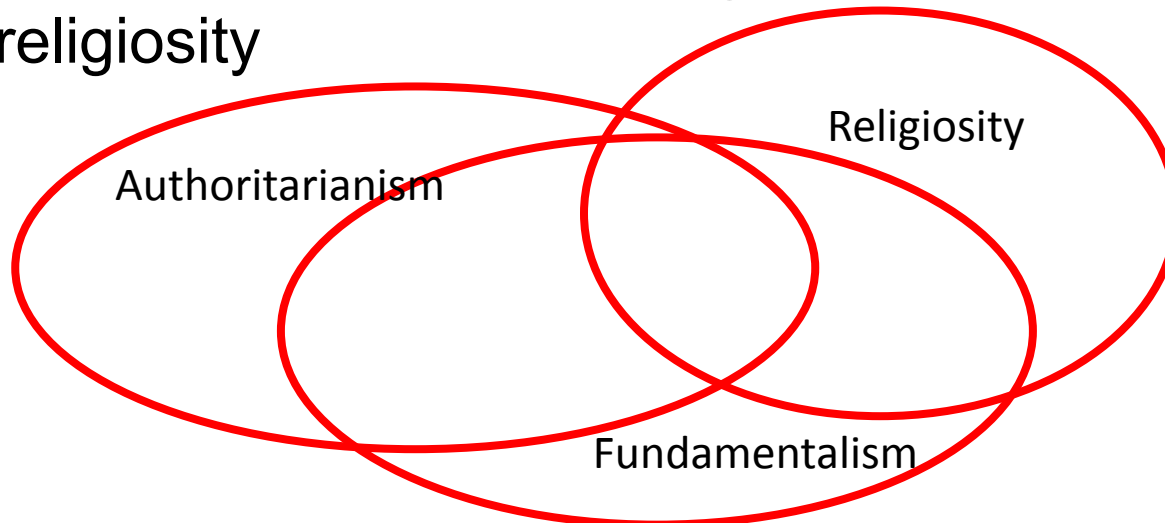
Authoritarianism and religion

Evangelicals = highest, atheist/ agnostics = lowest

Fundamentalism:

- Ingroup bias (“My religion is only correct..”)
- Rigid literalism
- Punishment
- Adherence to tradition

Authoritarianism **modestly** overlaps with overall religiosity



“Fundamentalism is an authoritarian way of being religious”

Authoritarianism **strongly** overlaps with fundamentalism

Is there authoritarianism on the LEFT? Debate

- NO: “More characteristic of the right” = “asymmetrical”
- When traits measured by politically neutral content (“follow leaders”) authoritarianism still skews conservative.
- Not equally prevalent in Western democracies. Where are all the leftie authoritarians and are they a threat to democracy?

Nilsson & Jost 2020

- Q: “what about totalitarian communists?”
- A: High RWAs in USSR were Communist Party members. Economic left wingers. BUT psychologically authoritarian followers (i.e., strong conventionalism) McFarland et al., 1992



Yes: Left-wing authoritarianism = right wing. “symmetrical”

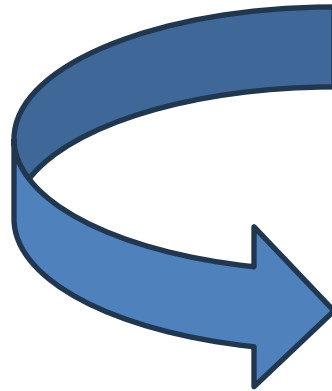
Extremists of both left and right: van Prooijen & Krouvel (2019)

Cognitively simplistic, inflexible

Moral absolutism

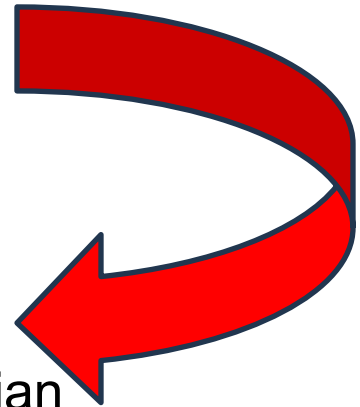
Overconfidence

Intolerant of different views.



Left wing
authoritarian.
Less dogmatic,
rigid,
conforming

Political
moderate
Non-
authoritarian



Shared authoritarian

traits:

Prejudice to different
others
Coercive use of group
authority
Moral absolutism

Right wing
authoritarian
More
dogmatic,
rigid,
conforming



IV. Situational activations and triggers

Rather than just a stable trait, authoritarian activation or enhancement
Disposition + Situation = increased authoritarianism
Perceptual vigilance External threat

Pre vs post 2004 Madrid attack: increased A
Outgroups prejudice increased not only against Muslims but others (Jews). Echebarria-Echabe et al., 2006

Reminders of climate change Fritzsche

Following COVID-19 pandemic Golec de Zavala et al., 2021.



Economic threat shifts values authoritarian

Sustained economic decline negative impacts social identity of historically dominant groups, leading them to enforce social norms (authoritarian values) to preserve social status.

Ballard-Rosa, et al., 2022.

Brexit voters in the UK:

Regions where labor market affected by imports from China shift to more authoritarian values (economic change -> authoritarian aggression). Ballard-Rosa, et al., 2021.

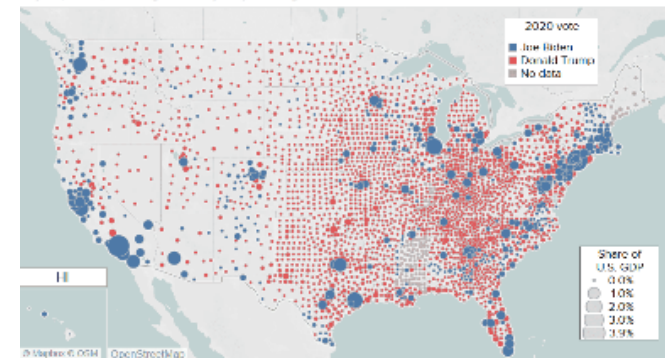
Economic declines
thwarts and frustrates



Authoritarian aggression

Two economies

Countries that voted for Joe Biden make up some 70 percent of the U.S. economy, while those that voted for Trump make up only 30 percent, according to an analysis by Brookings.



Source: Brookings, Metropolitan Policy Program analysis of data from Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections, Bureau of Economic Analysis, and the New York Times



Diversity exposure as threat:

Authoritarians are sensitive to diversity, react negatively to out-groups, politicians, the political system, and democracy. Van Assche 2019.

Exposure to diversity/ multi-culturalism increased prejudice in high authoritarians. Viewed as threatening. Kauff et al., 2013

OK

Exposure to
multiculturalism

Low RWA

High RWA



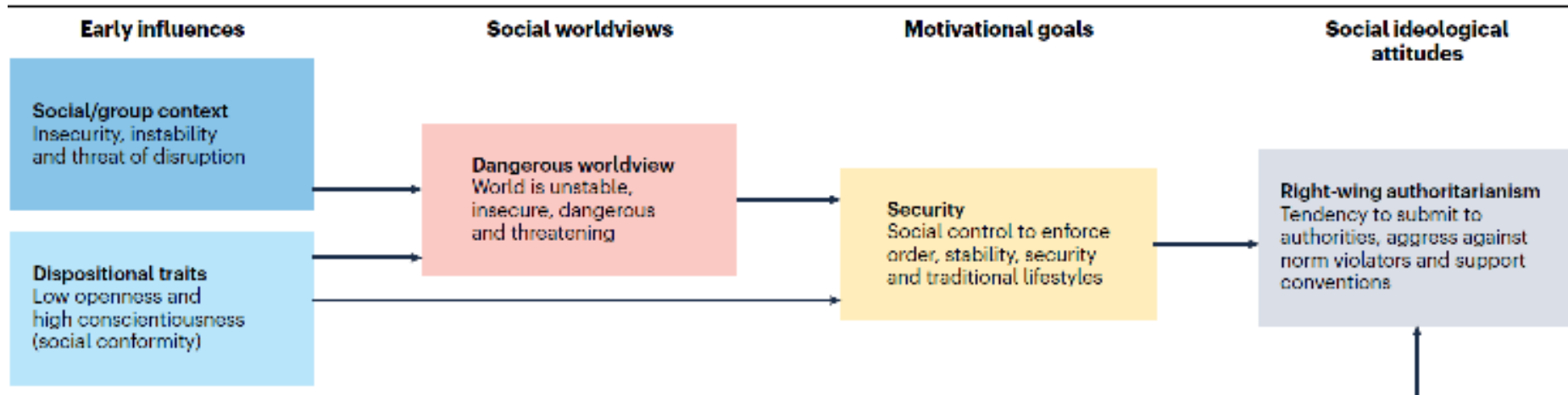
Increased threat

Prejudice

For **Liberals** (“social world is stable”), minor, **symbolic** threats have no effect.

But **serious** threats can shift people **authoritarian** (**conservatives** already see world as dangerous). Hetherington & Suhay, 2011

V. Summary: basic underpinnings lead to observed authoritarianism



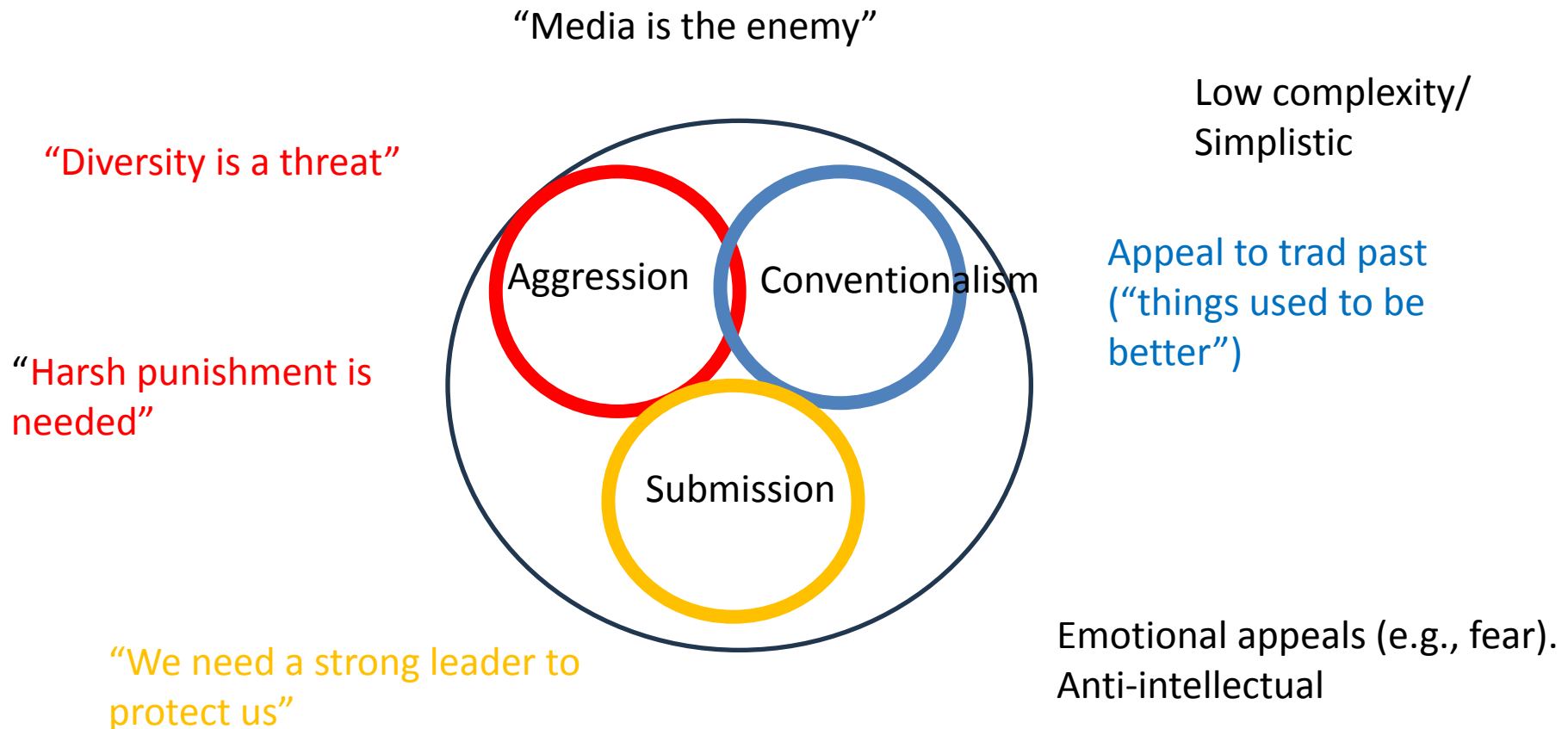
Vigilance to threat +
Believing in dangerous world
Chronic fear leads to....

“collective security motivation” =
Protection against perceived loss of control

Authoritarian beliefs and attitudes



Explains appeal of authoritarian message framing

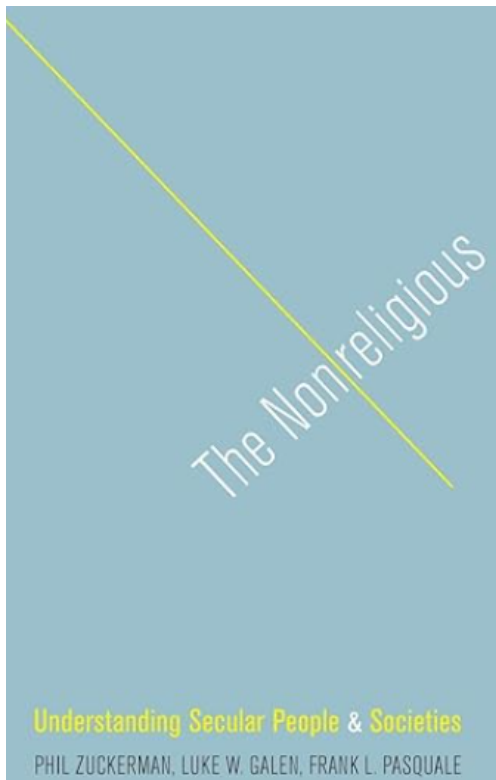


What to do

- Regarding high authoritarians....limit their impact.
- Moderates can “shift”, may be more amenable.
- Combat “threat narratives”.
- Critical thinking education.
- Increased contact with diversity? (Caution remember: perceived threat). Do not externally impose. High RWA prejudice is reduced by *positive* intergroup contact Dhont & Van Hiel 2009
- Appeal to common interest: “We all want.....”
- Unite as a “we” under superordinate groups:
 - **Humanity** > nation or tribe.

Questions and comments?
Thank you!

galenl@gvsu.edu



Books:

The Nonreligious
(Zuckerman, Galen,
Pasquale, 2014)

A Social Cognition
Perspective of the
Psychology of Religion:
Why God Thinks Like
you. (Galen, 2023)

