

Left-wing authoritarians share key psychological traits with far right, Emory study finds

By Carol Clark • Sept. 9, 2021



"Having clarity about the appeal of authoritarianism may be relevant to help better understand what's going on in the political landscape today," says Thomas Costello, an Emory graduate student of psychology and first author of the study.

People with extreme political views that favor authoritarianism — whether they are on the far left or the far right — have surprisingly similar behaviors and psychological characteristics, a new study finds.

The

[Journal of Personality and Social Psychology](#)

published the research by psychologists at Emory University — the first comprehensive look at left-wing authoritarianism.

"We took the long history of research into right-wing authoritarianism and used insights from that to develop a conceptional framework and measures to test for authoritarianism in the political left," says Thomas Costello, an Emory PhD student of psychology and first author of the study. "We found that in terms of their psychological characteristics and their actual behaviors, left-wing authoritarians are extremely similar to authoritarians on the right."

Right-wing authoritarians tend to aggressively back the established hierarchy, while left-wing authoritarians tend to aggressively oppose it. They are almost like mirror images of one another that both share a common psychological core, the researchers conclude.

"Authoritarians have a predisposition for liking sameness and opposing differences among people in their environment," Costello says. "They are submissive to people they perceive as authority figures, they are dominant and aggressive towards people they disagree with, and they are careful to obey what they consider the norms for their respective groups."

At its core, authoritarianism is likely about power, Costello adds.

"It's a mistake to think of authoritarianism as a right-wing concept, as some researchers have in the past," he says. "We found that ideology becomes secondary. Psychologically speaking, you're an authoritarian first, and an ideologue only as it serves the power structure that you support."

Predicting political violence

Another key finding is that authoritarianism from both ends of the spectrum is predictive of personal involvement in political violence. While left-wing authoritarianism predicts for political violence against the system in power, right-wing authoritarianism predicts for political violence in support of the system in power.

Respondents to an online questionnaire who scored at the highest end of a one-to-seven scale for authoritarianism were two to three times more likely to report having engaged in political violence during the past five years.

The good news is that both extreme authoritarianism and a tendency toward political violence appear relatively rare, Costello adds. Out of a sample size of 1,000 respondents, drawn from the online research tool Prolific and matched to the demographics of the U.S. population for age, race and sex, only 12 reported having engaged in political violence, and they all scored high for authoritarianism.

"It's clear that the loudest and most politically engaged segments of society have a big effect on our national discourse," Costello says. "But there's a big difference between criticizing those with opposing views and being willing to use violent force against people who disagree with you as a means of changing the status quo."

While an individual reporting that they had performed an act of violence was rare, nearly a third of respondents agreed with the statement that they wouldn't mind if a politician that diametrically opposed their own political views was assassinated. "The higher a respondent ranked on the scale for either left-wing or right-wing authoritarianism, the more likely they were to agree with this statement," Costello says.

Understanding left-wing authoritarianism

The psychological study of authoritarianism goes back to the 1930s, as social scientists tried to understand the psychological processes that made people more inclined to support the rise of fascism in Europe. The resulting Fascism Scale, developed to measure the strength of individuals' support for far-right ideology, helped spawn the field of political psychology.

The topic especially intrigued Costello, who plans a career in political psychology. He joined Emory to work with Emory psychologist

Scott Lilienfeld

— a leader in research at the interface of psychology, politics and the polarization of society — who passed away last year. Lilienfeld is senior author of the current paper.

"As I began investigating the topic of authoritarianism, I found it puzzling that psychology researchers had almost exclusively looked at the concept from the perspective of the far right," Costello says. "That makes it's difficult to truly understand the psychology of authoritarianism and the conditions that can lead to its spread in a society."

For the current paper, the researchers developed a conceptual framework for left-wing authoritarianism, created measures for it, and then refined these measures after testing their validity through a series of studies across five community samples.

In addition to the striking similarities between the two political extremes, the research also highlighted a key difference between the two: Left-wing authoritarians were more likely to perceive the world as a dangerous place and experience intense emotions and a sense of uncontrollability in response to stress. Right-wing authoritarians were more cognitively rigid, less open to new experiences, and less likely to believe in science.

The research does not delineate the prevalence of authoritarianism in society. Like any other personality trait, authoritarianism lies on a spectrum with only a few at the extreme top-end of the scale, Costello says.

"Our work should not be used as a political cudgel," he stresses. "Instead it should be used as a piece of information to help us understand the pull of extremism and intolerance. Having clarity about the appeal of authoritarianism may be relevant to help better understand what's going on in the political landscape today."

Co-authors of the paper include Shauna Bowes, an Emory graduate student of psychology;

Irwin Waldman, Emory professor of psychology;

Arber Tasimi, Emory assistant professor of psychology; and Sean Stevens, from New York University's Department of Business and Society and the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. The work was funded in part by the Institute for Humane Studies at George Mason University.

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(function(doc){ const feedLoadFn = function(){ const proxy = "https://template.aws.emory.edu/shared-assets/feed/proxy.php"; const url = "https://news.emory.edu/index.xml"; axios.get(proxy, { "params" : { "feed" : url } }).then(function(data){ console.log(data); const renderedString = []; const itemArray = []; //Push data into an array to be truncated data.data.feed.entries.forEach(function(entry,index){ itemArray.push(entry); }); //Return 3 items from feed const smallerArray = itemArray.slice(0, 3); //Iterate
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