The Rise of Trump
MacWilliams, Matthew C

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authoritarians. Thus, applying the cartoon character Pogo’s well-known aphorism to nonauthoritarian Americans, “we have met the enemy, and he is us.”

**Measuring Authoritarianism**

Measurement problems have plagued the study of authoritarianism since research on the question began. As noted above, the design and statistical validity of the first attempt to estimate individuals’ innate predisposition to authoritarianism, the F-scale, was challenged just four years after its introduction. By the 1960s, many scholars considered the F-scale an “Edsel, a case study in how to do everything wrong.”

New measurement schemes also fell short of the measurement mark for a variety of reasons. For example, the Conservatism scale conflated authoritarianism with conservatism; the foundation of the Balanced F-scale remained the scientifically unfalsifiable Freudian psychodynamic theory; and while the Dogmatism scale avoided the conservative bias of both the Conservatism and F-scales, the questions comprising it were worded (like the F-Scale) in one direction and subject to acquiescent response bias.

In an effort to resolve the ongoing authoritarian measurement problem, Altemeyer introduced the Right-Wing Authoritarian (RWA) scale in 1981 and has regularly updated it to reflect societal changes. A number of scholars of the subject have recognized the RWA

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71. Hetherington and Suhay make an important distinction between sociotropic physical threat and personal physical threat. They argue personal physical threat makes nonauthoritarians behave more like authoritarians. Sociotropic physical threat or, as operationalized in their study, perceiving “that the country is in danger” from terrorism (2011, 566) does not.


74. Altemeyer’s RWA scale first appears in *Right-Wing Authoritarianism* (1981), and later updated and refined the scale in both *Enemies of Freedom: Understanding Right-Wing
as an excellent tool for estimating authoritarian attitudes. Its fundamental strength is, however, its Achilles heel. Many of the questions on which the scale is based measure political attitudes. As such, the scale accurately measures authoritarian behavior, but does not identify individuals’ underlying predisposition to authoritarianism. This presents a particular theoretical problem for Stenner, who argues that authoritarianism is latent until activated by a normative threat. Since the RWA scale only measures an individual’s expression of authoritarianism, it is liable to miss those authoritarians who are not (yet) activated at a particular point in time. To both Stenner and Hetherington the RWA scale is tautological—an excellent measurement of authoritarian prejudicial preferences but an inaccurate predictor of a predisposition to authoritarianism.

The thicket of measurement problems intrinsic to the different scales designed to estimate authoritarianism consigned authoritarian studies to the “scholarly hinterlands” of political science for several decades. That changed, however, when a new measure, based on four childrearing questions, appeared on the 1992 ANES survey. Questions about childrearing values had been used on the General Social Survey (GSS) since 1973 as a tool for estimating authoritarianism. The inclusion of four similar questions on the ANES 1992 survey led to a revival of the study of authoritarianism by political scientists.

The childrearing questions appeared to resolve the vexing measurement problems that had bedeviled authoritarian scholars for decades. As Stenner succinctly explains, the four questions “enable us to distinguish authoritarian predisposition for authoritarian ‘products’ (attitudes)…which are sometimes manifested but sometimes not, and

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75. Hetherington and Weiler argue that the RWA scale “is so predictive of prejudice and intolerance… [because it is] largely a measure of prejudice and intolerance” and not authoritarianism. Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics, 47.

76. These commentaries and critiques are found in Feldman and Stenner, “Perceived Threat and Authoritarianism”; Stenner, The Authoritarian Dynamic; and Hetherington and Weiler, Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics.

77. As noted by Hetherington and Weiler, Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics, 36.

whose specific content may vary across time and space.” Armed with a new tool for identifying authoritarians, political scientists pushed the study of authoritarianism back onto the scholarly agenda, starting with an analysis of data that examined the interaction of perceived threat and authoritarianism.80

Recently, however, concerns have been raised about the cross-racial validity of the four childrearing questions. Early analysis of these questions found a higher percentage of authoritarians among African Americans than among whites. This finding by itself invited greater scrutiny of the questions themselves and how they are understood within different communities. Two scholars, Efrén Pérez and Marc Hetherington, contend that the gap in the prevalence of authoritarianism between African Americans and whites produced when childrearing questions are asked is “largely a measurement artifact.”81 Put simply, they argue that African Americans and whites interpret the childrearing questions used to estimate authoritarianism differently—a difference that arises from their condition of being in groups characterized by very different relative positions of cultural power. Thus, while the two groups appear to be answering the same questions, their answers are based on different understandings of what the questions ask. The result, in Perez and Hetherington’s view, is that the authoritarian scale generated by the childrearing questions is measuring different attitudes among whites than it is measuring among African Americans.

The cross-racial validity of the childrearing scale is an important question for any student of authoritarianism. Perez and Hetherington’s argument for scale variance is based on theory and supported by evidence. The suggestion of a monolithic allegiance of African Americans to racial group identity, measured in surveys through linked-fate questions, is pointed to as a root cause of variant interpretations of the childrearing questions among blacks.82

80. Feldman and Stenner, “Perceived Threat and Authoritarianisms.”
82. The linked-fate approach to understanding distinctive attitudes within racial groups is discussed in Katherine Tate, From Protest to Politics: The New Black Voters in American
attitudes expressed by black and white American authoritarians on issues surveyed in two polls (the 2008 ANES and the 2010 YouGov Polimetrux survey), which should theoretically engage respondents’ authoritarian predispositions, adds evidentiary weight to Pérez and Hetherington’s hypothesis. But it is the finding of statistical variance between black and white Americans in their understanding of childrearing questions asked on the 2008 ANES that provides Perez and Hetherington’s theory with empirical heft.85

The question of the childrearing scale’s validity across races is not a settled issue. To explore the issue of scale’s validity in more detail, I tested childrearing questions from five national polls in addition to the 2008 ANES.84 I found support for Perez and Hetherington’s theory that responses to authoritarian questions are variant between black and white Americans in one additional survey. But on the other four surveys examined, a multi-group confirmatory factor analysis found that the responses were invariant between the two groups. In other words, on four surveys, black and white Americans’ understandings of the childrearing questions were statistically similar—which means the authoritarian scale derived from the questions was valid across racial differences.85

Interestingly, the two surveys in which responses to authoritarian questions varied included “both” as an answer in addition to the paired childrearing responses. The four surveys in which the responses were invariant—and, therefore, valid—did not offer “both” as a response. The theoretical argument here is that the authoritarian scale will be invariant and valid for black and white Americans when responses to the childrearing questions are limited to paired attributes—and sur-

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84. Polls analyzed include: the 2008, 2011, and 2012 American National Election Studies surveys; the 2008 AmericasBarometer Survey; the 2014 University of Massachusetts module on the Cooperative Congressional Election Study; and a December 2015 study I conducted under the auspices of the University of Massachusetts.
85. My findings are detailed in MacWilliams, “American Authoritarianism in Black and White.”
vey respondents are not offered the option of choosing “both” as an answer. 86

The upshot here is that the scale derived from the childrearing questions is still a good measurement of authoritarianism. And the scale’s questions also provide a scientifically unbiased tool for estimating authoritarian support for Donald Trump—and assessing whether American authoritarians are more likely to favor him over other Republican candidates for president.

In light of the racially charged nature of Trump’s campaign—and the very different perspectives toward his candidacy of different racial groups—this point demands some further exploration. The political behavior of many African Americans is typically caught in a tug of war between their racial identity and whatever predisposition to authoritarianism they might feel. When an issue at hand engages the authoritarian predispositions of African Americans, authoritarianism can trump racial identity—producing attitudes that defy conventional wisdom, and dashing the common (and wrong) theoretical assumption in political science that African American political behavior is homogeneous. When it comes to the candidacy of Donald Trump, however, African Americans’ racial identity and historic partisan identity will overwhelm any disposition to authoritarianism. Since the 1948 executive orders of President Truman that desegregated the military and banned racial-based discrimination in federal hiring, a majority of African American have identified as Democrats. African American general election support for Republican presidential candidates has dwindled ever since, with only Eisenhower in 1956 (39 percent) and Nixon in 1960 (32 percent) the last Republican candidates to receive more than 30 percent of the African American vote. Even so, Trump’s ascriptive candidacy may set a new low watermark for African American support for Republican presidential candidates.

86. The statistical similarities between white and African American groups on two worldview principles and a range of worldview evolution issues—are further developed in MacWilliams, “American Authoritarianism in Black and White.”