Measuring American Authoritarians' Support for Donald Trump

To test the hypothesis that Trump's unvarnished, us-versus-them message and bellicose manner activated American authoritarians and drove them to rally behind him, I fielded a national public opinion survey. The poll was conducted online in December of 2015, approximately one month before the opening nominating contests in Iowa and New Hampshire. It sampled 1,800 registered voters. The topline results of the survey compared quite favorably to the findings of the New York Times poll fielded during roughly the same period.

Using the childrearing battery of questions to estimate authoritarianism, the national poll found that authoritarianism was one of only two variables that were statistically and substantively significant predictors of Trump support among likely Republican primary voters. Of course, many other theories have been advanced to explain Trump’s rise. Byrd and Collingwood argue racial resentment is behind Trump’s rise. Clifford Young of Ipsos points to nativism. Rahn and Oliver contend economic populism is behind Trump’s success. Following Hetherington and Weiler, I stipulate that authoritarianism is a predisposition that arises causally prior to the political attitudes and behavior that it affects. As such, it occurs before ideology, partisan-

87. The survey included standard demographic questions, feeling thermometers on political figures, groups of people, and organizations, screens to identify likely primary and general voters, candidate preference questions, items assessing respondents' worries about the sociotropic and personal threats posed by terrorism, and a bevy of values and policy questions. The Republican survey population was 558, which included eighteen African Americans.

88. The New York Times poll was a landline and cell survey that came out of the field one week before my online poll. It pegged Trump’s vote at 35 percent. My survey reported Trump’s support at 34.5 percent.


ship, and the other “isms” that have been offered to explain Trump’s rise. The authoritarian inclination of Trump voters are abundantly clear when the predicted probability of supporting Trump is estimated and arrayed across the authoritarian scale (Figure 1). 98

The only other variable that was statistically significant was personal fear of terrorism. 99 Additional variables in the regression model included sex, educational attainment, age, church attendance, evangelicalism, ideology, race, and income—all are typically reliable predictors of support for or opposition to a candidate. These variables had

![Figure 1: Predicted support for Trump among likely Republican voters by degree of authoritarianism](image)

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93. The 95 percent confidence intervals range from .0661 to .2997 for nonauthoritarians (0) to .3416 to .6051 for authoritarians (1).

94. The wording of this question is: “How worried are you that you or someone in your family will become a victim of terrorism?” Question answers ranged from “Not At All” to “A Lot” on a 7-point Likert scale.
no statistical bearing on support for Trump (Appendix, Table 1). Importantly, when it comes to authoritarianism, Trump supporters were also distinct in their attitudes from the followers of other Republican candidates for president. Support models for Ted Cruz, Ben Carson, Marco Rubio, and Jeb Bush, estimated using the same set of independent variables, found that authoritarianism had no effect on support for Trump’s opponents (Appendix, Table 2).

The difference between predicted authoritarian support for Trump and for all other Republican candidates is readily apparent when combined into one chart (Figure 2). Looking at this figure, it is important to note that authoritarianism is only a statistically significant variable for Trump. Thus, while the difference between the predicted value of Trump’s support among authoritarians and nonauthoritarians is sta-

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95. I reluctantly included many of these tag-along independent variables to preempt potential objections that the model was tweaked to make authoritarianism statistically and substantively significant. Of course, including these variables creates another potential statistical problem—collinearity. In the model as specified, I did not find a collinearity problem that would change the finding of the importance of authoritarianism to Donald Trump’s support.
tistically meaningful, any variation in support across the authoritarian scale for the other candidates is not.

The Role of Fear and Authoritarianism in Trump's Rise

As discussed earlier, while scholars differ on the specific origin of authoritarianism, threat and fear have long been theorized to play an important role in the activation of authoritarian behavior and the expression of authoritarian attitudes. Indeed, the linkage between threat and authoritarian behavior has remained a central focus of authoritarian studies from more than seven decades. Hetherington, Weiler, and Suhay have all advanced what I call the Pogo principle—that “[s] people in the middle and lower tiers of authoritarianism come to perceive threat, they adopt policy orientations that are more like an authoritarian's.”

With the terrorist attacks in Paris in mid-November of 2015 and the San Bernardino terrorist shootings occurring just two weeks later, I expected that fear of terrorism was rising—and that polling would find those who were more worried about terrorism would be more likely to support Trump. Theoretically, authoritarians and nonauthoritarians who are more worried about terrorism should be a receptive audience for the finger-pointing of a fear mongering candidate like Donald Trump.

The results from the national survey I conducted provided empirical support for this hypothesis, finding that personal fear of terrorism was a statistically significant predictor of support for Trump. Activated authoritarians, as well as fearful Americans, were (and remain) key components of Trump’s base. Trump’s calls for vigilance hit home with activated authoritarians as well as with an audience of nonauthoritarians primed by fear.

Graphed once again using predicted probabilities, the effect of fear of terrorism on support for Trump among less authoritarian voters is unmistakable. The more fearful nonauthoritarians are of the threat posed by terrorism, the more likely they are to support Donald Trump (Figure 3). Comparing those who are not at all afraid of terrorism to

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