

Authoritarians in Their Midst

On October 11, 2009, Republican Senator Lindsay Graham from South Carolina and Democratic Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts published an op-ed Article in the *New York Times* in which they argued that it would be possible to find a bipartisan solution to climate change. Any deal on climate change, they insisted, would have to include a “market-based system that will provide both flexibility and time for big polluters to come into compliance without hindering global competitiveness or driving more jobs overseas.” (Kerry and Graham 2009) Such an approach, they wrote, would also have to include more nuclear power, clean coal, onshore and offshore oil and gas exploration, taxes on imported goods manufactured in other countries that did not comply with environmental regulations similar to the ones with which American manufacturers had to comply and other protections for American businesses.

The day following the publication of the op-ed piece, according to the *New Yorker's* Ryan Lizza:

Graham was holding a town-hall meeting in the gym of a high school in Greenville, South Carolina. His constituents were not happy. One man accused him of “making a pact with the Devil.” Another shouted, “No principled compromise!” One audience member asked, “Why do you think it’s necessary to get in bed with people like John Kerry?” Graham . . . paced the floor, explaining that there were only forty Republicans in the Senate, which meant that he had to work with the sixty Democrats. A man in the bleachers shouted, “You’re a traitor, Mr. Graham! You’ve betrayed this nation and you’ve betrayed this state!(Lizza 2010)

It is difficult to understand the anger Graham faced in Greenville that night.

Graham's proposal was consistent with the 2008 Republican Platform upon which John McCain had run that year.¹ He had not called for gas taxes, he had not directly endorsed the "cap and trade" plan that had just passed the House of Representatives and he had not embraced any other proposal generally thought to be "liberal" on climate. Carefully examined, the anger of the crowd did not appear to be focused at all on the substance of the policy Graham was suggesting. Instead, Lizza's narrative suggests that what angered the crowd was Graham's willingness to work with John Kerry, the liberal senator who had been the Democratic party's presidential candidate in 2004.

The heckling Graham experienced that night is typical of the kind of behavior that flows from activated authoritarianism, a psychological predisposition that seems to be playing an increasingly important role in American politics. Authoritarianism is best understood as a pole on a continuum that runs from a state of complete individualism or libertarianism where people think of themselves as free to do whatever they please without communal restraint to a state of extreme communalism where people see it as a necessity to subordinate individual desires for the welfare of the collective. (Duckitt 1989;

¹ The Republican platform acknowledged that "the same human economic activity that has brought freedom and opportunity to billions has also increased the amount of carbon in the atmosphere. While the scope and long-term consequences of this are the subject of ongoing scientific research, common sense dictates that the United States should take measured and reasonable steps today to reduce any impact on the environment." The platform specifically listed nuclear power, solar, wind geothermal and hydropower, natural gas and clean coal as energy resources the U.S. should focus on developing, and it also called for "reducing the demand for fossil fuels."

Stenner 2005, 14). People who score low on various measures of authoritarianism (the “Low Authoritarians”) tend to be more open to experience, more trusting, more articulate and more optimistic than people who score high (the “High Authoritarians”). (Akrami and Ekehammar 2006; Altemeyer 2006; Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Stenner 2005). Americans currently are normally distributed along this authoritarian continuum with about 56% of the non-black population² clustered at or around the mean and with about 22% shading toward each of the distribution’s tails. Thus, it is inaccurate and even misleading to think of authoritarianism as a binary classification such as gender; instead, it is more accurate to say that some people are more authoritarian than others.

As currently conceived, authoritarianism is not simply the determination of leaders to dictate to and compel compliance from willing followers, nor is it merely a docile surrender to rules, tradition or charismatic leaders. Instead

authoritarianism is an individual predisposition concerned with the appropriate balance between group authority and uniformity on the one hand, and individual autonomy and diversity, on the other. . . .The cross-cultural covariation among particular ideas and attributes, which eludes explanation within a simple social learning framework, is understandable once authoritarianism is conceived as a system of *functionally related* stances addressing one of those “basic human dilemmas . . . common to all mankind” (quoting Duckit, 1989:72) . . . : that of the appropriate balance

² Unless otherwise noted, I focus only on Americans who are not African-Americans. While a majority of African-Americans are also clustered at or around the center of the authoritarian continuum, about 43% are High Authoritarians and only about 6% are Low Authoritarians. By contrast, about 22% of all non-blacks are High Authoritarians and about 21% are Low Authoritarians. Moreover, about 74% of African-Americans identify as Democrats and only about 3% identify as Republicans. Obviously, including this population would significantly skew my results and leave it open to the charge that its findings merely reflect the presence of African-Americans.

between group authority and uniformity and individual autonomy and diversity. (Stenner 2005, 14)

Authoritarianism, therefore, has to do with a person's identity, with an individual's sense of who he or she is, how he or she fits within a particular reference group, what the reference group's rules are and, significantly who is and who is not a member of the reference group. While it can be useful in helping people in enterprises requiring loyalty and team solidarity such as military organizations, sports teams, and fraternal groups, in its most extreme form, authoritarianism can be the source of racism and intolerance, particularly when people feel threatened by other people who are not like them.³ It is authoritarianism that predisposes people to distinguish "us" from "them," to create and believe favorable ideas about "us" in contrast to the unfavorable stereotypes about "them," to demand that people meet various "litmus tests" of purity before they are willing to regard others as part of the favored in-group, and to insist on harsh treatment—sometimes war or even death—both for members of the out-group and for in-group members who violate the rules and norms of the in-group. In fact, according to Stenner, highly authoritarian people are more interested in being part of *some* reference group with identifiable rules and norms to which they expect everyone to conform than in being a member of any *particular* reference group, and so they are willing to abide by and enforce the

³ The earliest systematic studies of authoritarianism occurred in the aftermath of the Holocaust as social scientist sought to understand what it was that lead highly "civilized" citizens of mid-century Germany to participate in the massacre of fellow citizens. (See, e.g. *The Authoritarian Personality* 1950)

rules and norms of the chosen reference group *regardless* of whether they agree with those rules or norms. Thus, the “primacy of . . . [group membership] over . . . [the rules and norms]—that is, for oneness and sameness over particular group identifications and normative commitments—is evidenced by the fact that the latter will be sacrificed or abandoned when they do not serve the former.”

(Stenner 2005, 18) This means that highly authoritarian people are more likely to change their policy views or ignore differences between their policy preferences and those of the group than to disassociate from the group entirely.

Because authoritarianism is often studied through its impact on relatively large ethnic, cultural or behavioral out-groups such as African-Americans, Muslims, communists, atheists, Jews or homosexuals, scholars such as Altemeyer (Altemeyer 1996, 2006), Hetherington and Weiler (Hetherington and Weiler 2009), and Stenner (Stenner 2005) tend to think of it as a predisposition of people who support movements that use rhetoric or support policies inimical to the rights, dignity or standing of such out-groups.⁴ Hetherington and Weiler, in *Authoritarianism & Polarization in American Politics*, marshal a considerable amount of evidence to show that American political issues are increasingly being structured along authoritarian/non-authoritarian lines and that the Republican party is becoming more authoritarian while the Democratic party is becoming less authoritarian. According to Jonathan Weiler

⁴ Such movements tend also to be highly nationalistic, patriarchal, traditional, oriented toward violence over negotiation and diplomacy and ideologically located on the right of the political spectrum. (Altemeyer 2006, 9)

The Republican Party, in 2010, has given itself over almost entirely to authoritarianism, a culmination of a forty-year long process in which the two parties, in terms of their bases of support, have polarized sharply in the deepest way possible -- not on the basis of policy differences or even ideology, but on the basis of deep-seated personality differences. Visceral, gut-level views about right and wrong, morality, diversity and tolerance more broadly now define party competition in America. (Weiler 2010)

While Weiler and Hetherington and Weiler may be correct in spirit-- Republican candidates do tend to make appeals that are far more likely to resonate with highly authoritarian people⁵—an analysis of the 2008 American National Election Study paints a somewhat different picture. Whereas the about 24% of Republican party identifiers can be classified as highly authoritarian, about 21.5% of the Democratic party who are not African-Americans can be similarly classified; both parties are numerically dominated by people who are best classified as only moderately authoritarian.

This distribution of the authoritarian predisposition within the electorate highlights the fact that there is no reason that authoritarianism need be associated with any particular political agenda. If this is true, there is no reason to think that the most authoritarian members of our society must necessarily find a home in the same political organization as Weiler and Hetherington and Weiler suggest. Indeed, contrary to the thrust of much of the research conducted on authoritarianism, there is also no reason to think that out-groups that are often

⁵ A good example of this was Sarah Palin's characterization of the small towns she visited during the 2008 Presidential election campaign as being "real America." (Eilperin 2008) A number of Republican candidates, surrogates and spokesmen made similar claims that year. (Brooks 2008; Stein 2008; Tapper 2008; See, e.g. "McCain's Brother Calls No. Virginia 'Communist Country'|ABC 7 News" 10/5/2008)

the subject of authoritarian ire must always be defined in terms of race, gender, sexual preference or ethnicity; *any group* can be an in-group that adds to an authoritarian's sense of identity and *any group* can be a hated or feared out-group. Senator Graham's Greenville town hall meeting illustrates the fact that even political parties can become exalted in-groups or hated out-groups. To the hecklers, Senator Graham was probably no longer South Carolina's senior Republican senator trying to work with the senior senator from Massachusetts to solve an important national problem, but rather, a person who had transgressed group norms and broken group solidarity—in this case solidarity with Republicans—to make common cause with a symbolic leader of the despised outgroup—in this case, the Democrats. That view explains why the hecklers called Graham a “traitor to the Republican party” and accused him of making a “pact with the Devil.”

Though the Greenville, South Carolina town hall meeting involved a Republican Senator, there, is no reason to believe that authoritarianism does not affect Democratic identifiers in similar ways. Indeed, Jack & Jill Politics, a liberal blog, featured an article that accused Senators Robert Menendez (D-NJ), Ben Nelson (D-NE), Evan Bayh (D-IN), Mark Begich (D-AK), Mary Landrieu (D-LA), Joseph Lieberman (I-CT), Claire McCaskill (D-MO), Mark Prior (D-AR), and Blanche Lincoln (D-AR) of being “Traitor Democrats” for “voting with the entire Republican bloc of the Senate to block the unemployment extension.” (The Christian Progressive Liberal 6/27/2008) Emphasizing the article's vitriol was a

graphic showing a hand plunging a dagger into the Statue of Liberty's back.

I argue that to the most authoritarian people, the two major political parties have, in fact, become salient reference groups. While it is true that highly authoritarian people tend to favor policies usually associated with the Republican Party—a greater willingness to engage in combat operations, traditional views on “moral” issues such as abortion and gay rights—highly authoritarian Democrats will not find the contrast between their views and that of the Democratic party as expressed by its Presidential candidate and the party platform troubling. Instead, because maintaining their identities as loyal Democrats trumps their policy preferences, they will not perceive large differences between where they stand and where the party stands on those issues, and they will also perceive great differences between where they stand on the issues and where the other party or candidate stands. Additionally, highly authoritarian people will have greater positive affect toward their party's “teammates” and greater negative affect toward the other side despite the fact that their policy preferences may be closer to where the other party stands.

Data and Measurement

I rely on data from the 2008 American National Election panel survey conducted before and after the 2008 presidential election. That survey is a particularly good database for testing the claims set out above because of the rather unusual circumstances of that election. The 2008 election took place in

the context of a “perfect storm” of circumstances likely to stimulate authoritarian tendencies in the electorate.⁶ First, the Democrats had nominated an African-American--a representative of a quintessential American out-group--to head its ticket, thus confronting the country with the possibility that the nation’s leader would not be white for the first time in history. Meanwhile, the Republicans had nominated Sarah Palin, anathema to Democrats for a variety of reasons, to be its Vice Presidential candidate, thus creating the real possibility that she could succeed to the presidency, given the advanced age of the Republican presidential nominee. The nation was also suffering through an economic catastrophe that threatened to become a depression, throwing millions of people out of their homes and out of their jobs and in the process, wiping out trillions of dollars of wealth. The country was involved in lingering wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that showed little likelihood of ending quickly. And finally, given the great antipathy for outgoing Republican President George W. Bush and the

⁶ There is an important link between perceived threat, authoritarian predisposition and authoritarian behavior. On an aggregate level, Sales finds that at times of social stress, people buy more “attack dogs” than they do at other times, join authoritarian religious denominations at greater rates than they do at other times, express greater attraction to powerful fictional characters, and express higher preferences for severe punishment of criminals. (Sales 1973) Stenner (Stenner 2005), Feldman and Stenner (Feldman and Stenner 1997) and Duckitt (Duckitt 1989) find that the perception of various kinds of threats tends to cause High Authoritarians to increase discriminatory evaluations and treatment of minorities and to prefer draconian social policies while Hetherington and Weiler (Hetherington and Weiler 2009) find that when Low Authoritarians perceive various kinds of threats, they tend to increase discriminatory evaluations of out-groups, demand harsher treatment of minorities and demand more draconian social policies as well. Stenner also finds that when High Authoritarians do not feel threatened and instead believe that there is communal unity, their evaluations of minorities and their conduct toward them, as well as their policy preferences come to resemble those of Low Authoritarians.

Republican party in general, though the Democrats had captured both houses of Congress in the previous election, the 2008 election offered Democrats and threatened Republicans with the potential for long-lasting Democratic hegemony. Viewed from this perspective, the stakes of this election were particularly high and probably activated the authoritarian predispositions, the manifestations of which I measure here.

To measure the authoritarian predisposition I use the same scale used by both Stenner and Hetherington and Weiler. Known as the “child rearing battery,” it is a set of four questions that ask respondents to choose between pairs of traits they believe parents should try to instill within their children. Specifically, respondents are asked to decide whether it is more important for children to be independent or respectful of elders, curious or good mannered, obedient or self-reliant, and considerate or well behaved; respondents are scored 0 for each non-authoritarian choice (independent, curious, self-reliant and considerate) and 2 for each authoritarian choice (respectful of elders, good mannered, obedient and well-behaved); respondents may volunteer “both” and such answers are scored 1. Each respondent receives a score equal to the additive total of the scores for each question so that the resulting scale ranges from 0 for a person with no authoritarian responses to 8 for a person who chooses the authoritarian response to each item. For ease of presentation, I have classed respondents whose scores ranged from 0-4.5 as “Low Authoritarians,” and those whose scores ranged from 4.51-8 as “High Authoritarians”; where numerical results are

appropriate, for ease of interpretation, each respondent's score has been rescaled so as to range from 0 to 1.

The dependent variables of interest are of two types. First I use responses to the ANES questions that relate to policy matters relevant to the political context of the 2008 general election, including views on abortion, gun control, gay rights, defense spending, social service spending and terrorism. I also use the responses to more general questions relating to respondents' perceptions of where they, the presidential candidates and the political parties stand in general policy space. In each case, I have recoded the variables so as to range from between 0 and 1 and then taken the mean.

Second, I use ANES feeling thermometer scores that range between 0 for an entity for which the respondent has the least positive affect and 100 for an entity for which the respondent has the greatest positive affect. Because survey respondents have a tendency to rate all groups positively, I have normalized all feeling thermometer scores by subtracting, from each respondent's thermometer reading for each feeling thermometer, the respondent's mean rating for all of the feeling thermometer ratings used in the survey. (See Kalkan, Layman, and Uslaner 2009, 4, note 4) To gauge party loyalty, I subtract each respondent's normalized feeling thermometer score for the Democratic party from his or her normalized feeling thermometer score for the Republican party so that net positive scores indicate a net preference for the Republican party while net negative scores indicate a net preference for the Democratic party.

In addition to measurements of authoritarian predisposition I use control variables for party identification, ideology, household income, education, age, gender and moral traditionalism⁷, all of which ought to affect policy preference and affect toward in-groups, out-groups and their spokesmen or representatives.

Though I look at Republicans and Independents for purposes of comparison from time to time, my main focus is on Democrats. I focus mainly on Democrats because, whereas highly authoritarian Republicans tend to agree with Low Authoritarian Republicans on policy matters (and so the effect of authoritarianism is often difficult to distinguish from the effect of ideology), highly authoritarian Democrats tend to disagree with Low Authoritarian Democrats on policy issues and so the impact of authoritarianism on issue stances is much easier to measure.

Issues and Answers

Authoritarianism, as a general rule, tends to correlate with Republican positions on many issues. In Table 1, I present the results of regressing various issue questions on authoritarianism and the control variables described above.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

In every case except for defense spending,⁸ the impact of authoritarianism on

⁷ The moral traditionalism variable is a scale based on the following two ANES questions: (i) the world is always changing and we should adjust our view of moral behavior to those changes; and (ii) we should be more tolerant of people who choose to live according to their own moral standards, even if they are very different from our own. (Hetherington and Weiler 2009)

⁸ In general, one would expect highly authoritarian people to favor increased defense spending because they tend to fear outsiders and they tend to believe that military force is a better way of handling conflict than is negotiation. In 2008, after 7 years of war and facing huge government deficits, only about 30% of the

issue stances is significant. More importantly, in every case where the impact of authoritarianism is significant, increasing levels of authoritarianism place respondents closer to the general Republican position on the issue than toward the Democratic position on the issue. The foregoing notwithstanding, the Partisanship column of Table 1 shows that there is no relationship between authoritarianism and party identification.⁹ Thus, contrary to the claims of Hetherington and Weiler, higher levels of authoritarianism do not necessarily lead one to become a more committed Republican.

Because they are interested in the general effect of authoritarianism on political behavior, scholars like Stenner and Hetherington and Weiler stop here. In this paper, though, I consider the effect of authoritarianism on partisan political behavior and so I continue the analysis one step further. Table 2 mirrors Table 1

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

except that Table 2 reports coefficients only for self-identified Democrats and independents who admit that they lean Democratic. To limit the possibility that the results capture the behavior of people who claim to be Democrats but who tend to vote Republican (“Democrats in Name Only” or “DINO’s”), I exclude any Democrat who did not vote for Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential election.

Once again, as in Table 1, in every case except for defense spending and border security, there is a statistically significant relationship between increasing levels of authoritarianism and support for more conservative, republican leaning electorate thought the U.S. should increase spending on national defense.

⁹ As a measure of party identification, I use a 7 point scale that runs from strong Democrat to strong Republican.

policies. Moreover, as in Table 1, there is no statistically significant relationship between increasing levels of authoritarianism and party identification as we might otherwise expect were highly authoritarian people to choose their party identification based on their policy preferences.

Voting and Party Affect

Despite the fact that higher levels of authoritarianism tend to lead one to prefer more “conservative” policy positions, higher levels of authoritarianism do not necessarily override one’s willingness to identify oneself as a Democrat, and, at least in 2008, they also did not make highly authoritarian Democrats significantly more likely to vote for John McCain for president or to create a net positive affect for the Republican party or Republican “teammates.”

In Table 3, I report the results of a logistic regression of presidential vote choice on authoritarianism, moral traditionalism, gender, household income, education, age, and ideology for self-identified Democrats and Democratic leaning independents who are not African-American. The only variable that has any significant effect in this model is ideology; authoritarianism does not affect vote choice in any significant way. In fact, over 87% of the highly authoritarian Democrats voted for Barack Obama for president, which, is only slightly less impressive than the 92.16% of Low Authoritarians who also voted for him. Interestingly, about the same percentage of highly authoritarian Republicans voted for John McCain, and so, at least in 2008, about the same percentage of Republican High Authoritarians defected as Democratic High Authoritarians.¹⁰

¹⁰ Why these people defected is beyond the scope of this paper. Because

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Of course, it is entirely possible that the highly authoritarian Democrats voted for Barack Obama, because, for some reason, they simply judged the Obama-Biden ticket to be less objectionable than the McCain-Palin ticket. To get a sense of whether this was the case, I cross tabulated normalized mean feeling thermometer scores for various individuals and groups generally associated with the Democratic and Republican parties respectively (“teammates”) with levels of authoritarianism for both parties. If highly authoritarian Democrats voted for the Democratic ticket because they believed it was the “lesser of two evils” we should expect that their feeling thermometer scores should resemble those of Republicans; otherwise, the fair inference is that the highly authoritarian Democrats voted for Barack Obama and Joe Biden because they had strong positive feelings about the Democratic ticket, just as other Democrats did. (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2004)

Figures 1 and 2 suggest that highly authoritarian Democrats voted for the Democratic ticket because they had a more positive view of the Democratic team

INSERT FIGURES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE

in general than they had for the Republican team. Focusing first on the bars in

Figure 1 that represent normed feeling thermometer scores for the Democratic

authoritarians tend to be the least educated and least intelligent voters, it is entirely possible that these voters did not follow the election closely enough to know which of the candidates their parties supported or which candidate best represented their views. On the other hand, Stenner notes that Highly Authoritarians will abandon their reference group when they perceive that the group’s leadership is illegitimate, incompetent or ineffective. Arguably, the latter two conditions applied to the Republican establishment in 2008.

party and the bars in Figure 2 that represent normed feeling thermometer scores for the Republican party, it should be clear that, in each case, the partisans significantly prefer their own groups and significantly dislike the other group, and perhaps more importantly, the normed thermometer readings of High Authoritarians track with the readings of the other members of their groups. In fact, in every case, except for Republican evaluations of the Republican Party, the differences between the High Authoritarians and the Low Authoritarians of the same partisan group fail to reach conventional levels of statistical significance.

In the one case where there are statistical differences between partisans—Republicans reporting feelings for the Republican party—the difference is telling. In 2008, *both* Democrats and Republicans acknowledged that the previous Republican administration had made significant economic and foreign policy mistakes; in fact, the Republicans spent a lot of time and effort trying to convince the electorate that those mistakes would not be repeated. Given the country's circumstances, this difference is not surprising, particularly given the fact that Republican Low Authoritarians tend to be better educated—and therefore probably better informed—than High Authoritarian Republicans who have less tolerance for complexity, are less articulate and are more likely to have a world view that emphasizes group integrity. (Altemeyer 2006; Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Stenner 2005) People whose orientation is toward group solidarity as are High Authoritarians are simply more likely to report high group

affect under all circumstances than are people whose evaluations are more objective and performance oriented as are the Low Authoritarians.

In addition to normed feeling thermometer scores for the Democratic and Republican party, Figures 1 and 2 also report normed thermometer scores for “teammates” of the Democratic party and the Republican party respectively. To form these “teams” I have included only those groups who are clearly allied with the Democratic and Republican parties except that I have excluded groups—such as whites and Christians—of which a large percentage of the respondents are likely to be members.¹¹ In almost every case, whereas Democrats, regardless of where they stand on the authoritarian spectrum, have net positive feelings for Democratic team members and net negative feelings for Republican team members, Republicans have net negative feelings for Democratic team members and net positive feelings about Republican team members; where the scores for both parties are either all positive or all negative the difference between the two parties is always significant.

¹¹ Even though Jews vote for Democrats in large numbers, it is not clear that anyone who does not follow politics carefully would know this, particularly since the stereotypical Jew is rather well-to-do and deeply associated with business. Aside from church and state issues the key public issue for Jews is Israel, and both parties compete with each other to show that they are among Israel’s top supporters. Similarly, though Hispanics voted in large numbers for Democrats in the last election, Democrats have not made a point of promoting policies that support the rights of Hispanics in the same way they have supported the rights of African-Americans. Homosexual are not necessarily members of the Democratic team since not even Low Authoritarian Democrats give them normed thermometer scores above zero. I have not included evangelicals on the Republican team since the bulk of the High Authoritarian Democrats consider themselves to be evangelicals.

The one interesting exception to the pattern described above is the way that Highly Authoritarian Democrats feel about liberals. It is particularly telling that highly authoritarian Democrats do not seem to like liberals or realize that the Democratic party represents the country's liberals.¹² It could well be that Republicans and conservatives have succeeded in creating a negative connotation for the word "liberal." Says Waldman:

As everyone knows, conservatives have succeeded in making "liberal" an epithet, something they throw at their opponents—who try desperately to dodge the label. The demonization of "liberal" has been successful in part because conservatives have effectively created what social psychologists call a "schema" with decidedly negative features around the term. A schema is a set of ideas that are connected in people's minds, such that activating one idea—"liberal"—activates a whole set of related ideas, like lights on a Christmas tree. We assemble schemas as a way of storing and categorizing related information in memory. In this case, the related ideas are things like "soft on crime," "weak on defense," "sexually permissive," and so on. The ideas liberals would like to pop right up in people's heads when they hear the term liberal—"wants prosperity for everyone," "supports universal health care" or "stands up to powerful interests"—are farther away from the schema's center. (Waldman 2006)

Relatively low cognitive ability is a key defining characteristic of people who score as highly on all measures of authoritarianism. (Altemeyer 2006; Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Stenner 2005) Because High Authoritarian Democrats are the least educated¹³ and least sophisticated segment of the

¹² In addition to the data presented in Figures 1 and 2, a crosstab of authoritarianism with the ANES survey question that asks whether the Democratic Party is the liberal party discloses that only about 35% of the highly authoritarian Democrats knew that the Democratic party was the liberal party.

¹³ High Authoritarian Democrats average about 12 years of formal education. The next least educated are the High Authoritarian Independents who average only 12.5 years of formal education.

population,¹⁴ they simply may not know what a liberal is or that the Democratic party is the liberal party in American politics. If this is the case, then, as previously argued, it is group solidarity—the importance of being a Democrat (whatever that is to them)—and not political ideology that must be driving the partisan behavior of the High Authoritarians.

Dissonance or Ignorance

I have, thus far, established that, though highly Authoritarian Democrats favor more conservative policies than other Democrats, a relatively high percentage of them voted for the Democratic presidential ticket, that they feel the same affection for the Democratic party, in general, that their co-partisans do and that they also generally rate Democratic and Republican “teammates” the same way that other Democrats rate them. Not only are these people not “DINOs,” they appear to be proud and loyal Democrats.

Don’t these people realize that they probably would be more ideologically at home in the Republican party and that they really should be voting Republican? According to Tables 4 and 5, apparently not. Table 4 reports the mean differences between the self-reported ideologies of survey respondents, the political parties and their presidential nominees while Table 5 reports the correlations among the various measures. For ease of presentation, the ANES 7 point ideological scales for ideology have been recoded to range from 0-1

¹⁴ High Authoritarian Democrats admit to having the most difficulty defending their opinions followed by the High Authoritarian Republicans and then by the High Authoritarian Independents. They are also the most likely group to agree with the ANES survey statement that “Politics is too complicated to understand.”

instead of from 1 to 7; to arrive at the value reported in the tables, I take the

INSERT TABLES 4 AND 5 ABOUT HERE

difference, in each case, between the mean value of self-reported ideological placement and the mean values each class of respondents gave for Barack Obama, John McCain, the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. For purposes of these measures, the objective accuracy of each perception is irrelevant because, presumably, each respondent used the same standard in evaluating himself or herself as he or she used for evaluating the presidential candidates and the political parties.¹⁵

In every case, the absolute mean difference between responding High Authoritarians, their parties and their candidates is less than 8 percentage points, and in every case, the relationships between ideological self-placement and the other measures are moderately correlated. What is striking is that High Authoritarian Democrats see almost no difference between where they stand and where their party and their presidential candidate stand in terms of general ideology, and, indeed, the self placements of High Authoritarians from both parties correlate much more strongly with their perceptions of where their candidates and their parties stand than do the ideological self placements of their respective co-partisans correlate with their evaluations of their respective parties

¹⁵ Of course, the High and Low Authoritarians cannot both be right about the spatial location of the candidates and the parties, but, at least as far as the Democrats go, it is more likely that the Low Authoritarians were closer to being right about Barack Obama than the High Authoritarians. The *National Journal*, for example rated Barack Obama as “the most liberal member of the Senate,” (Friel, Cohen, and Victor 2008) for 2007.

and candidates. Though High Authoritarian Democrats see themselves as ideologically closer to John McCain than Low Authoritarian Democrats do, they see themselves as being ideologically nine times as close to Barack Obama and 17 times as close ideologically to the Democratic party than to the Republican party. Similarly, the High Authoritarian Republicans see the gap between themselves and Barack Obama as being more than 10 times as great as they believe the gap to be between themselves and John McCain and they also see the Republican party as being about 12 times closer to themselves ideologically than they see the Democratic party to be.

There are only two good explanations for this data (assuming, that is, that the High Authoritarian Democrats are factually wrong about where the candidates and the parties stand relative to their own ideological positions) : Either they simply do not know or do not understand where the candidates and the parties stand on the issues, or else, because of cognitive dissonance, they choose to interpret what they learn about the candidates and the parties as being consistent with their own beliefs. If it is the former, then Highly Authoritarian Democrats are probably not engaged in issue voting and are probably voting Democratic because they are good Democrats and that is what good Democrats do. If it is the latter, then even if they are engaged in issue voting, Highly Authoritarian Democrats are minimizing the differences they perceive between their preferred issue positions and those of the party and the presidential candidate. In either case, the behavior is consistent with Stenner's observation

that highly authoritarian people are more interested in being loyal group members than in pursuing particular ideological preferences and that in the case of a conflict between group norms and individual preferences, highly authoritarian people will abandon individual preferences in favor of conforming to group norms. (Stenner 2005, 18)

Discussion

The results presented here should make it clear that authoritarianism is not a pseudonym for “conservatism” or any other ideology. Various degrees of authoritarianism permeate all three major American political groupings; indeed, more than half of the country’s population has moderate authoritarian predispositions and each group is numerically dominated by moderate authoritarians. Authoritarianism in American politics, at least at the mass level, does not structure the debate, as Hetherington and Weiler suggest since it neither determines party identification nor does it drive presidential vote choice. Indeed, those whose authoritarian behavior emerges because of what Stenner calls a “normative threat” to group status or integrity are probably not primarily interested in the nuances of policy at all, but instead, are trying to help their teams win (or, perhaps more accurately, avoid losing). If this is so, then authoritarianism seems to function as a kind of heuristic, a quick way to get one’s bearings in the political world. It tends to help a person know which leaders to follow, which policy positions the team supports and which groups are part of his or her political team. Once people know what team they are on, who else is on

the team and who is not on the team, they know which messages to accept, which politicians to support, and unfortunately, who to demonize. Lindsay Graham found this out the hard way: For the hecklers, he *was* consorting with the enemy.

Despite the fact that authoritarianism does not structure the political debate in any meaningful way, understanding how authoritarianism works in American politics can be enormously helpful in making sense of the nasty campaign environment in which our current political system resides. Most of the “low hanging fruit,” voters who can easily be peeled away from their parties, has probably already been harvested and so any additional “realignment” based on authoritarianism seems unlikely. While there is, to be sure, a small percentage of people who are either “DINOs” or “RINOs”, authoritarianism orients people to support the parties with which they identify, even if they do not agree with the party’s stands on key issues. High Authoritarians, as good partisans, catch the messages their parties’ elites pitch at them, they probably do not receive the messages the other side sends their way (Kahan 2010; Lavine, Milton Lodge, and Freitas 2005; Zaller 1992), and they go into “battle mode” if they can be convinced that their parties are threatened. Given that over 85% of both parties’ High Authoritarians ultimately voted for their parties’ presidential candidates and similarly large percentages also voted for their parties’ Senatorial candidates, it would be unwise for either party to be spending much time trying to encourage the other party’s High Authoritarians to jump ship. These people seem to be

strongly rooted to their parties, and they are probably not leaving any time soon.

On the other hand, the nasty tone of the “permanent campaign” does two other important things, both of which *are* tied to authoritarianism. First, though one party’s message is probably not being fully received by the other side, it *is* probably being fully received by the party’s base. It is therefore no coincidence that almost from the moment of his election, a sizable percentage of the Republican Party has been lead to believe that Barack Obama was not born in the United States (45%), thus making his presidency unconstitutional, or that he is a Muslim and not a devout Christian (57%) or even that he is the “Antichrist.” (25%) (Schlesinger 2010) According to Stenner, authoritarians tend to increase their animosity toward out-groups and increase support for in-groups when they are confronted with the idea that their in-group is under siege or when they perceive that they are being subjected to illegitimate or ineffective leadership. In addition, with increasing levels of threat, according to Hetherington and Weiler, people who ordinarily would not behave intolerantly toward people who identify with political parties other than their own—Low Authoritarians—suddenly begin to follow their more authoritarian co-partisans. (Hetherington and Weiler 2009). Thus, the negativity that permeates American politics serves to energize the party bases for political conflict.

Second, while authoritarianism itself had no statistical relationship, for partisans, to presidential vote choice in 2008, for people who do not admit to identifying with either of the parties, it did have a significant effect. Table 6

reports the change in the probability of voting for John McCain and is based on a logistic regression that included all of the variables that appear in the table plus moral traditionalism, gender, income and age as control variables; for ease of presentation, only

INSERT TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

variables that produced statistically significant effects appear in the table.¹⁶ By stoking up fear, Republicans, *ceteris paribus*, increased the likelihood of voting for John McCain by over 36%; as a side benefit, even without the effect of authoritarianism, a Democrat who became fearful of Barack Obama became over 86% more likely to vote for John McCain while a similar Independent became over 74% more likely to vote for him; a Republican who became fearful of John McCain, similarly became over 77% more likely and an Independent who became fearful of John McCain became over 47% more likely to vote for Barack Obama.

The remarkable thing about all of this is that throughout this paper, policy has not had to be an important consideration driving either party identification or presidential vote choice; indeed, for the highly authoritarian, policy does not seem to make any difference at all. Instead, I have been able to describe some important political behavior—party affect and voting—solely in terms of psychological and sociological processes. That is because, from the standpoint

¹⁶ The model also included a variable for net party affect. When added to the model, all of the other variables lost significance. A separate calculation was made for each group separately. Pseudo R2 values ranged from .31 to .49.

of authoritarianism, what matters is group integrity, solidarity and dominance; consistent with Green, Palmquist and Schickler, people support parties and vote for candidates because they identify with them, but not necessarily with the policies they support. (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002) When described this way, at least on the mass level, American politics seems to be like large, high energy competitions that pit two or more teams (perhaps chosen somewhat arbitrarily) against each other in competition over what amounts to “bragging rights,” not unlike the “color wars” in which children participate when they are at summer camp. The problem is that in the political “color wars” in which the highly authoritarian participate, the stakes are much higher than most people can imagine.

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