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Race and Authoritarianism in American Politics

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Abstract

Authoritarianism, it seems, is alive and well these days. The Trump administration's blatant dismissal of democratic norms has many wondering whether it fits the authoritarian model. This review offers a framework for understanding authoritarianism in the American past, as well as the American present. Starting in the early twentieth century, this analysis seeks to provide a better understanding of how authoritarianism once existed in enclaves in the Jim Crow South, where it was intended to dominate blacks in the wake of emancipation. Confining the definition of authoritarianism to regime rule, however, leaves little room for a discussion of more contemporary authoritarianism, at the micro level. This review shifts focus to an assessment of political psychology's concept of authoritarianism and how it ultimately drives racism. Ultimately, we believe a tangible connection exists between racism and authoritarianism. Even so, we question the mechanism. Along the way, we also discuss the ways in which communities of color, often the targets of authoritarianism, resist the intolerance to which they have been exposed. We conclude with a discussion of why we believe, despite temporal and spatial differences as well as incongruous levels of analysis, that micro- and macro-level authoritarianism have much in common.

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INTRODUCTION

Recent history has stimulated renewed interest in the study of authoritarianism. Consider Europe and Latin America. Across these regions, dictators have emerged by way of the ballot box and not the muzzle of a rifle. In Russia, Turkey, Hungary, Poland, Venezuela, Peru, and Ecuador, strongmen have successfully rolled back democracy. With the rise of Donald Trump, the focus now shifts to the United States. His propensity to govern by fiat, running roughshod over democratic norms, poses a credible threat to American democracy (e.g., Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018). Either by design or blunder, his challenges to such democratic institutions as a free press and independent judiciary, to name just two, may well cause irreparable harm. In turn, if these institutions are damaged, so too will be the democratic experiment that began some 250 years ago. This, however, is not the first time the United States has faced the prospect of authoritarian rule. In the South, the period that began after Reconstruction and ended in the early 1960s cannot be described as democratic by any definition. White southern politicians were the rulers, and the black community, bereft of the franchise, among other things, were the ruled (Mickey 2015). This article takes as its focus the impact of authoritarianism on communities of color. We consider how scholars have come to understand the circumstances under which people of color (POC) come to be exposed to authoritarianism and how they are affected by it.

Before continuing, we think it wise to first unpack what we mean when referring to “authoritarianism.” Authoritarianism, in the context of comparative politics, in general, describes a regime type in which the power to govern is concentrated in a single party or run by a single figure. Authoritarian regimes are characterized by, among other things, weakened institutions, the unregulated use of executive power, repression, and patronage with its concomitant loyalty to the ruler or ruling party (Linz 1964). Civil liberties, if they exist, remain in constant peril. Classic examples include, of course, Italy’s Mussolini and Germany’s Hitler. This type of authoritarianism, we think it safe to say, resides at the macro level of analysis.

There is another kind of authoritarianism, one that resides at the micro level. The still-classic work on this, *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno et al. 1950), suggests that people with authoritarian traits are likely to believe that submission to authority is essential and that those who fail to submit are to be punished. A more recent interpretation is that authoritarianism is about social conformity (Feldman & Stenner 1997, Feldman 2003). Any deviation from convention is not to be tolerated.

Under these definitions, there is no shortage of ways in which the experience of communities of color in the United States may have been impacted by authoritarianism. Consider slavery and the Jim Crow period. By the criteria we just laid out, these were clearly periods during which authoritarian rule held fast in the South. Likewise, if authoritarianism at the individual level ultimately gives way to race-based intolerance, it is easy to imagine how such a predisposition affects communities of color to this day. Through the lens of authoritarianism, tolerance is not extended to POC because they are believed in violation of the American norm of whiteness (e.g., Devos & Banaji 2005). Race-based policies are rejected, moreover, because POC are believed to be in perpetual violation of American values (e.g., Sears & Kinder 1981). At its core, attitudinal authoritarianism is commensurate with intolerance. Therefore, part of our review includes race-based intolerance writ large.

Generally speaking, authoritarianism is a one-way affair, one that runs from the top down. At the macro level, it consists of the ruler governing by fiat, with the ruled falling into line. At the micro level, authoritarianism consists of the culturally dominant group attempting to impose its beliefs on subordinate groups. In the interest of a more comprehensive review, we include the

ruled and subordinate groups. We discuss how the ruled respond to the absence of democracy and how the subordinated respond to intolerance.

In the first section below, we cover the first half of the twentieth century. That is when the South, home to much of the United States' black population, was overtaken by authoritarian rule: the legal regime known as Jim Crow (Mickey 2015). We examine how authoritarian rule in the South affected social and political life for the black community and discuss the reasons for the implementation of authoritarian rule. Of course, we also examine the response of the black community, including the various strategies accompanying the freedom struggle and culminating with the Civil Rights movement. With the success of the Civil Rights movement, authoritarianism at the macro level in the South was effectively dismantled. We continue our examination of authoritarianism as a source of racial oppression at the micro level in the second half of the review. Here, we begin in the 1960s and continue to the present day. We conclude with a discussion of the implications.

AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA

Discussions of authoritarianism at the macro level often rely on the United States in a comparative manner. Unlike other, more recent democratic nations, America is frequently perceived as an exemplar of democracy. After all, it is one of the older continuing democracies on the planet. Notwithstanding the postwar South, the system of checks and balances by which our political system operates has prevented the United States from devolving into an authoritarian regime (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018). The standard was set by European colonization of indigenous American groups that did not have a centralized state organization. This assisted in the solidification of democratic norms in the early American state and the formation of concomitant democratic institutions following the American Revolution (Abernethy 2000, Hariri 2012).

Once democracy has taken root, it tends to thrive in economically developed countries (Przeworski & Limongi 1997), as democracy is intimately related to development (Jackman 1973, Bollen 1979, Burkhart & Lewis-Beck 1994). Moreover, to the degree that democracy is a precondition for economic development (Gerring et al. 2005), and to the degree that economic development is desired, the preference for democracy becomes reinforced over time. For these reasons, among others, democracy remains firmly entrenched in the United States, slavery and the Jim Crow era notwithstanding. The rise of Donald Trump, however, forces scholars to apprehend why the country is trending toward authoritarianism, complete with a renegade executive and party loyalists willing to permit him to govern as he sees fit (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018). Again, this is not the first time the United States has confronted authoritarianism.

If we review autocracies the world over, it is clear that the South during slavery and Jim Crow was democratic only insofar as the dominant party shared its name with a system of government in which the people are integral to the decision-making process. According to Levitsky & Ziblatt (2018), a regime is probably an authoritarian regime if it demonstrates four basic criteria. First, the regime demonstrates a lack of commitment to democratic rules, such as banning basic civil or political rights (e.g., Mickey 2015), as was done in the South. Second, the regime denies the legitimacy of its political opponents. The Republicans, given their racially progressive stance in the region, were run out of the South (e.g., Key & Heard 1949, Kousser 1984). Third, the regime tolerates or engages in violence. The first and second versions of the Ku Klux Klan fulfill this requirement. Violence, and the threat of its use for even the tiniest transgression, was a source of constant terror for black southerners (e.g., Litwack 1987). This brings us to the fourth criterion: The regime curtails civil liberties. This criterion includes threats to "punitive actions against critics in...civil society" (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018, p. 24).

Political Domination Under White Supremacist Rule

Under authoritarian regimes, expressions of civil liberties are limited, if not altogether denied (Linz 1964). And while authoritarian regimes in the American South successfully limited social freedom for blacks living under Jim Crow, political domination was most often the means to such an end. Therefore, although the historical record is rife with detailed examinations of white domination over black political life, it has a blind spot when it comes to associating political repression with authoritarian rule. Following the end of Reconstruction, southern society remained organized around the interests of planters. While few freedmen and -women remained to work for their previous owners, ultimately, they remained close by, moving a plantation or two away, working under similarly miserable conditions (Litwack 1979). Therefore, even though the plantation economy of the South was substantially damaged following the war, a new, albeit weaker, racial state quickly emerged. The postwar racial state ensured local government domination over blacks in three ways: through racial segregation, the defense of landlords against sharecroppers, and black disenfranchisement (James 1988, p. 196).

Political exclusion was the key. Without political representation, black southerners lacked defense against terror and the ability to benefit from fair wages. Southern states devised a number of ways to exclude black southerners from political representation without running afoul of the Fifteenth Amendment. Disenfranchisement statutes, such as poll taxes, literacy tests, and grandfather clauses, coupled with decades of vote dilution, eliminated most of the black population from politics without ever mentioning race. Even as the federal government aimed to expand civil rights and liberties, Louisiana, for example, passed ever more restrictive voter registration laws in 1898 and rewrote the state constitution in 1902 to include strict voter disenfranchisement. This effectively decreased Louisiana's black registration rate to less than 2% for over 40 years (James 1988, p. 198).

Even as President Harry Truman pushed the Democratic Party toward civil rights in the 1940s, southern states continued their streak of political dominance by maintaining the "white primary" (Kousser 1984). First installed by South Carolina in 1896, and eventually adopted by all of the former Confederate states, the Democrats excluded all but a handful of black southerners from registering with the party. Since the South was the preserve of the Democratic Party, under one-party rule, the Democratic primary ultimately decided the eventual general election winner. The death of the white primary in 1944 alarmed many southern politicians. Candidates' campaigns, such as Theodore Bilbo's US Senate reelection campaign in 1946, predicted a black voter surge and focused on combating it (Dittmer 1994). Bilbo's campaign "urged his white audiences to prevent blacks from voting in the [primary] election" and echoed the sentiments of the *Jackson Daily News*' advice to blacks: "DON'T TRY IT.... Staying away from the polls...will be the best way to prevent unhealthy and unhappy results" (Dittmer 1994, p. 2). Although Bilbo guessed correctly, and thousands of blacks arrived at the polls to vote in the primary, estimates suggest at least half of eligible black voters were discouraged or outright turned away by threats of violence, allowing Bilbo to win reelection with ease.

By the mid-twentieth century, the political domination of blacks in the American South was so complete that the groundbreaking work of Matthews & Prothro (1966), *Negros and the New Southern Politics*, saw no means of relief beyond massive federal intervention. In their work evaluating whether or not black political participation would eventually threaten one-party, authoritarian rule within the 11 former Confederate states, Matthews and Prothro expressed pessimism toward the prospect of blacks ever challenging the racial status quo on their own. From their analysis of political participation, broadly defined as "all behavior through which people directly express their political opinions" (Matthews & Prothro 1966, p. 37), they concluded that even in areas of

large black voting populations, little political change was likely because black communities were weak in all other forms of political resources.

Furthermore, Matthews & Prothro (1966) found that counties with larger black populations also had lower black voter registration rates. This suggests that the size of a black population alone fails to equate with political power. Although this is counterintuitive, once one considers the power-threat hypothesis, all falls into place. The power-threat hypothesis claims that majority groups have an incentive to become hostile toward minorities when either political or economic resources are at stake (Blalock 1967). The perception of threat is roughly proportionate to the presence of the minority relative to the majority. Overall, Matthews & Prothro (1966) believed that increased federal intervention might act as a far more powerful force for social change than the black vote on its own. These authors, however, declined to completely write off the potential for change born in black southern communities. Skilled and persistent leaders, they believed, could increase the likelihood that blacks might forge coalitions with working-class whites whose common economic interests were leading them to support the national Democratic Party, even as Democrats became more progressive regarding civil rights. Nonetheless, Matthews & Prothro (1966) claimed that the black vote would bring at most modest gains in the face of dominating, one-party rule. In other words, black political subjugation was to remain a defining characteristic of southern life for many years to come.

Social Domination: Segregation and Education

As whites reclaimed southern politics during Redemption, institutions conceptualized as democratic and regulated by the one-person, one-vote principle fell to the will of white supremacy. With black voices eliminated from politics, the legal and institutional subordination of black social life became commonplace as well (Litwack 1999). The failures of Reconstruction led to decades of separate development for blacks and whites in the South, culminating in two interdependent yet segregated societies bound by Jim Crow laws and the extralegal mob violence of “Judge Lynch” (McMillen 1989). Authoritarian rule in southern enclaves successfully relegated blacks to the outskirts of both political and social life.

Scholarship that chronicles black social life under Jim Crow offers compelling evidence of authoritarian rule. For example, separate spaces for public accommodation allowed for the policing of black aspirations, especially in deep southern states, such as Mississippi. Beginning in 1888 with a “separate coach law” segregating railroad trains (for white comfort), white supremacy reclaimed Mississippi, creating a state whose legal obstacles to black civil rights were matched only by its racist customs (McMillen 1989, p. 8). Moreover, as Kelley (1993, p. 110) reminds us, “when thinking about the Jim Crow South, we need to always keep in mind that African Americans, the working class in particular, did not *experience* liberal democracy. [Blacks] lived and struggled in a world that resembled, at least from their vantage point, a fascist or, more appropriately, a colonial situation.”

Education and housing were also impacted by authoritarian rule. By 1890, biracial education was outlawed in Mississippi, and due to white social pressure and poverty, black slums lined the outskirts of most cities and towns. Two patterns of black residential settlement defined much of Mississippi. On the one hand, “back-yard” settlements evolved from antebellum arrangements of field hands and servants; on the other, physically separated communities were explicitly defined by racially exclusive areas (McMillen 1989, p. 13). In both cases, the separation between black and white neighborhoods was clear. As antiblack sentiment crystalized toward the turn of the century, demands for physical separation grew. Segregating blacks and whites into separate societies also solidified interracial sex as unacceptable, and the prohibition of interracial unions was written

into state constitutions; such was the case for Mississippi in 1890 (McMillen 1989). The threat of violence to keep neighborhoods white and to protect the purity of the white race mounted throughout the twentieth century as white families built strong communities around exclusively white systems of public education (Kruse 2007).

As segregated social spaces were institutionalized in the South by the early twentieth century, the potential for race mixing around education was especially contentious. Education offers one of the clearest paths to upward social mobility, and school systems are also factories of socialization for young children (e.g., Jennings & Niemi 1974). For many whites across the country, it was unbearable to consider placing their children alongside those of “inferior” blacks (Bartley 1969). This was especially the case in the Deep South, where blacks and whites in states such as Mississippi had never attended the same schools, and state and local politics became a testament of direct resistance toward warming national sentiments on integration (McMillen 1989, Crespino 2009). The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* Supreme Court decision, ruling racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional, set off massive resistance throughout the South.

The successful segregation of public schools in much of the South can be traced to the landmark *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision, which had legalized separate but equal spaces of public accommodation in 1896. Half a century later, the process neared completion with the aid of New Deal housing policy, which provided an escape from overcrowded inner-city life—an escape exclusively offered to whites. Fair Housing Administration loans that devalued black and brown neighborhoods institutionalized the process of redlining, or identifying communities of color as bad investments by marking them red on real estate and investment maps (Rothstein 2017). The suburbanization of American cities increased the physical separation between blacks and whites and further institutionalized social norms and economic inequality across the segregated South (Massey & Denton 1993). Now, not only would whites send their children to school without having to worry about sharing space with blacks, but they would do so with the belief that whites fully earned their suburban lifestyle through hard work, rather than government policy employed to encourage residential segregation (Rothstein 2017).

Consequently, the *Brown* decision sent shock waves throughout the authoritarian enclaves in the South, spawning reactionary movements of massive resistance in opposition to school desegregation. The same once-rural, “neobourbon” political leaders who resisted multiparty rule now organized in a coalition of producers of labor-intensive crops (cotton and tobacco), business leaders in banking and commerce, and local elected officials, all determined to defend the southern way of life (Bartley 1969). With the *Brown* decision, unchecked white supremacist southern rule faced its toughest challenge yet, and, in May of 1954, the nation’s first White Citizens’ Council was founded in Indianola, Mississippi (McMillen 1994). By 1956, the Citizens’ Councils of America organization was formed as the coordinating agency for hundreds of local Citizens’ Councils that became the South’s answer to the threat integration posed (Rolph 2018). Councils served as both political organizations and social tools to intimidate blacks (and moderate whites), purge voters from rolls, spearhead anti-desegregation legislation, and oversee massive propaganda campaigns essential to maintaining the racial status quo in the face of further democratization (McMillen 1994).

Citizens’ Councils’ campaigns of political resistance were especially prominent in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia, where White Citizens’ Councils “used economic reprisals to intimidate those who dared to challenge the racial status quo” (Kruse 2007, p. 6). In Atlanta, working-class whites were less successful in their attempts maintain single-party rule. It was white flight from the inner-city battlegrounds that allowed whites to remake themselves as a separate and racially homogeneous society, now emphasizing their individual rights and liberties to live wherever they chose. And when the battle turned to school desegregation, white Georgians argued, “It is

perfectly alright [sic] if people who want integration have all the integration they want, provided those who feel otherwise are granted the same ‘freedom of choice’ to do otherwise” (Kruse 2007, p. 163). The right to choose what kind of children attended school alongside one’s own child allowed Citizens’ Councils to effectively challenge school desegregation with local political campaigns advocating, for example, the establishment of private school systems, and their resistance reinvigorated a new era of Ku Klux Klan terrorism (McMillen 1994, Kruse 2007).

With massive resistance in full swing, states like North Carolina touted the rebirth of the Klan in the mid-1960s. As the Citizens’ Councils served as an institutional response to *Brown*, the third-era Ku Klux Klan (preceded by appearances of the Klan during Reconstruction and again in the early twentieth-century South) represented the most “uncompromising resistance” to federal civil rights policy (Cunningham 2013, p. 74). With varied impunity and police complicity, the Klan affected politics through violence, and even the mere threat of violence, against blacks and their allies (Matthews & Prothro 1966, Cunningham 2013). Unlike the third-era Ku Klux Klan, the Citizens’ Councils avoided violence, but they remained determined to curb the threat of school desegregation and voting access in states with large black populations. With regional expansion came new ambitions, and Citizens’ Councils across the South relied on their political connections and economic leverage to maintain a racially segregated society (Rolph 2018).

From 1877, when the Union Army was forced to withdraw from 10 of the 11 former Confederate states, to 1965, when the Voting Rights Act was passed, black southerners were thoroughly dominated by authoritarian rulers. Black southerners had no civil or political rights. Of course, this status quo was facilitated by the absence of the Republican Party, which was seen as a threat to the southern way of life. For this reason, Democrats scarcely recognized the Republican Party’s legitimacy. The deployment of violence as a means of social control, and as a way to deter the black community from even registering to vote, further weakened democracy in the South. During much of the Jim Crow era, the southern black press was so heavily censored that black southerners were forced to rely on papers from the North if they wished to read anything critical of their oppression (Oak 1970). The aforementioned authoritarian tendencies made possible the installation of the “tripartite system of domination” discussed by Morris (1984), in which southern white rulers controlled black social, political, and economic life.

RACIAL DOMINATION, AUTHORITARIAN AGGRESSION, AND BLACK RESISTANCE

Above, we elaborated on the totality with which white southern rulers exercised control over the black community, but this was not a one-way street; the black community resisted as best it could. Encompassing the slave revolts led by Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner, the work of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Black Lives Matter, resistance to white supremacy spans the entire history of black existence in the United States. Everyday actions such as learning to read and write, violent rebellions before and after the Civil War, participation in armed service during America’s wars, and organized civil disobedience in the twentieth century exemplify the black community’s resistance to authoritarian rule. Indeed, democracy descended on the South by way of black insurgency and concerted action on the part of some white elites to unwind white supremacy (e.g., McAdam 1982, Mickey 2015).

This brings us to why the black community decided to resist and why it was ultimately successful. Naturally, black southerners were outraged at the continuing oppression. At the individual level, the black community was more concerned with rights and justice than other issues. If correspondence written to the president by black southerners is even remotely indicative of their sentiments on the conditions of the postwar South, equality and fairness were foremost

considerations (Lee 2002). Black southerners had a difficult time reconciling second-class citizenship with the universal rights declared in America's founding document. Were they not American? Justice required that their race be reconciled with the national identity as Americans, a chore thought impossible by W.E.B. DuBois (1993). Black war veterans harbored similar sentiments, even more intense because they had actually worn the uniform and were literally willing to die for equality. Parker's (2009) narrative is a bit of a departure from Lee's (2002) assessment in that Parker demonstrates that their sense of injustice motivated them to actually challenge Jim Crow.

Challenging southern rulers was, no doubt, daunting for individuals. It was too easy to be singled out and persecuted or even murdered. Black southerners, then, turned to indigenous institutions as a means of challenging white supremacy. This served at least two purposes. First, it gave them ready access to networks of like-minded individuals with whom they felt a sense of solidarity (Gurin et al. 1989). Beyond that, black churches and civic organizations encouraged civic engagement (e.g., Dawson 1994, Harris 1999). To depart from this norm was to risk encountering disapproval from others in the group. Surely, however, black institutions and indignation were present prior to the 1950s and 1960s. So, what accounts for the breakthroughs in those two decades?

Several factors were at play. We cannot, for example, discount the impact of World War II and the Cold War. In order to fully mobilize for the former, it was necessary to mobilize the black community (Klinkner & Smith 1999, Kryder 2000). Manpower in both the armed forces and industry was needed to prosecute the war. Part of the mobilization process, however, entailed framing the war as an "us versus them" proposition: We stand for freedom and democracy; they (the Axis powers) stand for dictatorship and racial superiority. The irony was not lost on the black community, but it mobilized anyway (Klinkner & Smith 1999, Parker 2009). Even then, black troops were segregated and often barred from fighting on the front lines. Still, they wore the same uniforms as white troops and were as willing to die. Further, after getting a taste of equality overseas from indigenous populations, things were never going to be the same on their return stateside (Parker 2009). Likewise, after getting a taste of better wages working in industry, many blacks refused to return to the status quo. Add to this the rhetoric of freedom and democracy surrounding the war effort, and the seeds for postwar challenges to white supremacy were laid.

This was followed by the Cold War. Undertaking a world-wide ideological battle with the Soviet Union, accompanied by the perpetual search for allies in so-called Third World countries, proved a difficult task for the United States. How could America wage this war and search for allies, when it treated its own black and brown population with such contempt? The debacles at Montgomery, Little Rock, Tuscaloosa, Oxford, and Athens were blights on the American brand, and the Soviets took full advantage of them, gleefully publicizing each event to a worldwide audience, one that included prospective allies. Such exposure forced the United States to make limited concessions for civil rights in the interest of maintaining its international standing (e.g., Dudziak 2000). This pressure paved the way for federal intervention in school integration efforts and the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960. At the same time, for various reasons, black institutions were much stronger in this period than ever before (McAdam 1982). The proliferation of mass media and the generosity of some liberal whites also helped (e.g., McCarthy & Zald 1977).

Pressure from an assortment of civil rights organizations, including the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Congress of Racial Equality, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and many others, culminated in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the combination of which signaled the demise of authoritarian rule (e.g., Mickey 2015). The black community applied near-constant pressure on authoritarian rulers. For this reason, among others, it is difficult to understand the end of Jim Crow without centering black resistance. In

the end, the Civil Rights Act rid a significant portion of the country of the stain of de jure segregation, and the Voting Rights Act yielded tangible benefits for black southerners (Button 1978). Having said all of this, we wish to make clear that contesting white supremacy failed to achieve consensus among black southerners. Indeed, some blacks across the nation wondered whether too much progress was happening too fast (Marx 1967). Some black southerners even believed that politics should be left to white people (Matthews & Prothro 1966). This, however, was largely a function of age. Old veterans of authoritarian rule had seen what happened to “uppity” members of the community. They prioritized safety over attempts at social progress (Litwack 1987). As history suggests, these views failed to carry the day, and challenges to authoritarian rule spurred the growth of a political movement that eventually swayed the conscience of the entire nation (Lee 2002).

AUTHORITARIANISM AND RACISM AT THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

Now that we have witnessed the ways in which authoritarianism operates in the American context historically, at the macro level, we must next assess it at the micro level of analysis. Authoritarianism, as the concept was established in the comparative political literature, applies to political leadership. But another kind of authoritarianism exists at the mass level, one that for all practical purposes established the field of political psychology. Bluntly put, authoritarianism refers to the need, for some, to impose order on a world full of anxiety-inducing events (Fromm 1941, Adorno et al. 1950). To compensate for this anxiety, this predisposition pushes people to embrace social convention and paves the way for them to submit to authority, both of which result in the submersion of individual difference in favor of social conformity (e.g., Adorno et al. 1950, Altemeyer 1996, Feldman 2003). Aggression is reserved for those who fail to observe convention and conformity, and it often manifests as intolerance of difference (Adorno et al. 1950, Altemeyer 1996). Authoritarianism, in short, is about “oneness and sameness” (Stenner 2005, p. 288).

With this in mind, connecting authoritarianism to race is a simple task; theoretically, diversity of any kind is upsetting to authoritarians. Those who value conformity and social cohesion wish to punish what they see as deviations from social convention (Duckitt 1989, Feldman 2003). Why? They believe that adherence to social norms and values reduces the likelihood of a given society experiencing the social instability feared by those who desire order (Feldman 2003). Violations of said norms are, therefore, perceived as threats to social harmony (Stenner 2005). By this logic, authoritarians see POC as threats to social stability. Or, at the very least, they do not fit into American society. The most common way of testing this is through an assessment of the relationship between authoritarianism and racism in its various forms.

Varieties of Racism

Generally speaking, racism is assessed in at least three categories. The first is known as old-fashioned racism (OFR). This type of racism refers to beliefs on the part of whites that blacks are biologically inferior, require a wide berth, and do not merit policies designed to help the black community overcome barriers associated with discrimination (e.g., Bobo & Kluegel 1993, Tesler 2012). This type of racism was most prevalent for most of the twentieth century, after which a change in antiblack attitudes occurred. Between the 1940s and the 1980s, OFR fell out of favor, replaced by two new kinds of racism. One of these, sometimes called *laissez-faire* racism, consists of invidious stereotyping of communities of color (especially the black community), blaming POC for their marginalized status, and opposing policies designed to mitigate the disadvantages to which POC have been systematically exposed (Bobo 1999). This is the dominant sociological

approach to racism. The other, called modern racism, has different origins. Here, the shift in racial beliefs—at least those that are reported—began in the 1960s. Modern racism began as a backlash during the so-called urban crisis, during which the black community rebelled against continuing discriminatory practices in the North. Instead of continuing to subscribe to the perceived biological inferiority of the black community, racist sentiment emphasized antiblack affect and the belief that blacks were habitual violators of “cherished American values,” especially the American work ethic (Sears & Kinder 1981, Kinder & Sanders 1996). This framework represents the dominant social-psychological approach.

However, before we assess the relationship between authoritarianism and race, we need to account for relatively recent revisions to the way(s) in which authoritarianism is activated. By definition, authoritarianism represents a reaction to the perception of social threat, after which authoritarian aggression guides the subsequent behavior, i.e., punishment or intolerance toward those who fail to comply with convention. The problem is that until Feldman & Stenner’s (1997) work, threat was underoperationalized; at the mass level, threat was made salient only to the degree that the manifest content of the items included it. In the absence of imminent threat, it is not clear that the authoritarian predisposition will be triggered. After all, as a predisposition, authoritarianism is always present. It should never increase or decrease, *per se*. Feldman & Stenner (1997) validated their claims in observational studies, using threat to moderate the effects of authoritarianism. Others then followed suit, but they used experimental approaches instead of observational data as a means of manipulating threat to moderate the impact of authoritarianism (e.g., Lavine et al. 2002, Stenner 2005).

The Nexus of Race and Authoritarianism

As it turns out, the type of racism doesn’t matter a whole lot, as authoritarianism is associated with all three types.¹ In tracing the connection between authoritarianism and racism, let us begin with OFR. OFR remains important to the extent that it captures antiblack sentiment prior to the postwar shift in how whites expressed racism. Drawing on a social distance indicator, e.g., a white person’s right to refuse to sell their home to members of the black community, Stenner (2005) demonstrates, beyond much doubt, the association between authoritarianism and OFR. There are main effects in which the authoritarian predisposition increases racial intolerance, but when this intolerance is moderated by threat—in this case the threat that the United States is becoming divided—the effect increases dramatically. Some have argued that refusal by whites to sell their homes to blacks is an expression of conservatism more than anything else (e.g., Lassiter 2006), a conservative interpretation of rights. The idea is that people have the right to dispose of their property as they see fit. Stenner (2005), however, controls for conservatism, suggesting that the pattern really arises from authoritarian aggression.

The evidence is a bit more abundant for modern racism. Several studies indicate the connection between authoritarianism and racial resentment, or symbolic racism. Feldman & Stenner (1997), for instance, show that, when faced with political threat, authoritarians believe that blacks do not wish to work hard. Furthermore, Velez & Lavine (2017) show that context matters. They hypothesize that in areas in which minorities constitute a large portion of the population, a condition that

¹However, the number of studies devoted to the intersection of racism and authoritarianism is surprisingly small, given the theoretical overlap. We suspect this neglect has to do with the completeness with which the concept was discredited (e.g., Hyman & Sheatsley 1954, Smith 1997). After remaining largely dormant for the better part of 30 years, the topic of authoritarianism was effectively revived by Altemeyer (1981) with more precise measures.

represents threat, authoritarians are more racially resentful than those in other areas with fewer minorities in residence. The results validate their claim.

With regard to the third type of racism, that which hinges on the out-and-out derogation of blacks by way of stereotypes, the results are similar. Again, heightened political threat pushes those predisposed to authoritarianism toward believing that blacks are lazy, violent, unintelligent, and unpatriotic (Feldman & Stenner 1997). If we want to count as racism attitudes toward immigrant groups (and we do), the results are very similar. Parker & Barreto's (2014) work suggests that those who are authoritarian are also likely to believe immigrants have too much political power and to reject policy objectives designed to provide a measure of equality to immigrants.

Outstanding Issues

This is all to the good. In spite of the shocking shortage of empirical testing, we can say a strong relationship exists between authoritarianism and racism at the micro, or individual, level of analysis. The observed relationship, nonetheless, raises at least one question. We have already mentioned the hypothesized relationship between racism and authoritarianism: Social diversity breeds prejudice. Additional experiments conducted by Stenner (2005, ch. 9) confirm that it is really difference, and not race, that accounts for prejudice in authoritarians. But what is it about diversity, specifically as it pertains to POC, that upsets authoritarians so much? Beyond this allusion to diversity, there is no clear explanation. Permit us to speculate. First, we need to establish the cultural baseline from which deviation is resisted. It is well known that American identity is tethered to white, male, Christian, native-born heteronormativity (Devos & Banaji 2005, Canaday 2009). Deviation from any one of these categories will likely subject one to a lifetime of prejudice or discrimination. What, however, is the mechanism by which authoritarianism informs racism? Is it a matter of believing that POC are innately inferior? If this is the case, the mechanism is OFR. Is it that POC fail to adhere to cherished "American" values such as hard work? If so, this is commensurate with modern racism. What about the ideas that POC do not love the country as they should and are prone to criminality? As we know, these stereotypes rest firmly on a foundation laid by laissez-faire racism. We know that authoritarianism is associated with all three kinds of racism, but what is the mechanism? This requires further investigation.

We must also say something about the much-discussed topic of authoritarianism and the election of Donald Trump. By now, several books, including *How Democracies Die* (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018), have identified Trump as an authoritarian. After all, his presidency is characterized by all the criteria we mentioned in the Introduction: weakened institutions, the unregulated use of executive power, repression, patronage and the concomitant loyalty to the ruler or ruling party, imperiled civil liberties (Linz 1964). Those predisposed to authoritarianism are believed to prefer dominant leaders as a means of assuaging threat. It stands to reason, then, that people in the mass public who register high on authoritarian traits would have been more likely to vote for Trump than those who are relatively low on those traits. This, however, is not the case. There is no difference between high and low scorers on an authoritarian trait scale in terms of voting for Trump (Barreto & Parker 2020). How can this be?

For starters, the absence of contextual threat as a moderator compromises the explanatory power of authoritarianism. As Stenner (2005) suggests, the effect of authoritarianism depends on a dynamic with authoritarians on the one hand, libertarians on the other, and how each group responds to manifest threat. In the absence of manifest threat, she suggests, these opposing forces are not necessarily in a hurry "to man [their respective] barricades" (Stenner 2005, p. 319). This lack of intensity provides less variation for the measure, depressing its explanatory power. This makes sense; however, as we have already noted, there are occasions on which authoritarianism

provides explanatory leverage in a simple additive model. It may also be the case that a fully specified model, one that includes social dominance orientation, weakens the explanatory power of authoritarianism.

Scholarship indicates that the relationship between authoritarianism and social dominance orientation is generally weak (Altemeyer 1998, Pratto et al. 1994), and even where it is stronger, the former predicts political preferences independent of the latter (e.g., Hiel & Mervielde 2002). Barreto & Parker (2020) also account for ethnocentrism and racial resentment. Even these are only weakly correlated with authoritarianism (i.e., Pearson's $r < 0.22$ in both cases), so it is unlikely that they mediate the relationship between authoritarianism and Trump support. Therefore, we are left with the discomfort of knowing that micro-level authoritarianism fails to predict the election of an authoritarian president—that is, at least as authoritarianism applies to a model specification in which the predispositive effect of the construct on voting for Trump is not a joint function with context-driven threat.

The final two issues we discuss center on the measurement of authoritarianism. The problems associated with the original scale are well documented, including response-set bias (e.g., Hyman & Sheatsley 1954). Later, as mentioned above, Altemeyer (1981) revived the study of authoritarianism with a scale that uses balanced, less morally freighted items. Authoritarianism at the individual level was originally conceived as personality traits, authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism, but recent research has begun to question this approach. Instead of the single-dimension personality approach in which these traits covary, right-wing authoritarianism is seen by recent scholars as a constellation of social attitudes that, although driven by personality, are not reduced to it. The content of the items, they argue, consists of statements broadly ideological in nature. In fact, the model best fits a three-factor solution (Duckitt et al. 2010, Bizumic & Duckitt 2018), rather than the single-factor model hypothesized by Altemeyer (1981).

Another measurement-related issue confronts the child-rearing scale developed by Feldman (2003). Feldman's scale avoids some of the issues associated with Altemeyer's (1981) measures, including the use of items that are, by definition, part of conservative ideology, not to mention the problem with the item content of right-wing authoritarianism, and its association with outcome variables of interest. Feldman's solution was to develop a scale that avoids these issues while tapping into the core concept of authoritarianism. However, his four-item scale does not mean the same thing to all Americans. As Perez & Hetherington (2014) show, blacks and whites conceive of authoritarianism in different terms. Although Perez and Hetherington fail to speculate on the issue, we think this difference has everything to do with why black parents, historically, have applied authoritarian practices to child rearing: It helped children survive the violence of the South (Litwack 1987).

On balance, under the right circumstances, we are convinced that the authoritarianism–racism nexus is real. The problem, however, is the failure to elucidate the mechanism by which the relationship works. The most efficient way to pin this down is by way of open-ended questions. We say this because the best way—face-to-face, in-depth interviews—is, for a variety of reasons, impractical. Open-ended questions permit the respondent to reason through theoretically relevant (for the analyst) concepts, revealing how the population under study actually thinks about the topic (Schuman 2008). In other words, like in-depth interviews, open-ended questions may furnish the “why” to a research question, while sacrificing little of the explanatory power furnished by large-N surveys.

Race, Authoritarianism, Resistance

Above, in the section on authoritarianism and Jim Crow, we outlined the manner in which the black community resisted authoritarianism through insurgency. At the macro level, southern

authoritarian enclaves ceased to exist in 1972 (Mickey 2015). It has been a different story at the micro level. If we can say that authoritarianism drives racism (and we can), and racism informs white policy preferences (it does), it is not a stretch to say that authoritarianism continues to play a role in inequality in the United States. After the apparent success of the southern phase of the Civil Rights movement, culminating in 1965 with the Voting Rights Act, the freedom struggle continued elsewhere. Beyond the South, although the black community could already vote, it suffered from residential and labor market discrimination. The Fair Housing Act of 1968, passed as a tribute to the late Martin Luther King, Jr., was a supposed solution to residential discrimination, but it had next to no impact given the weak enforcement mechanism.

The “silent majority,” that swath of white America “who paid their taxes, and worked hard,” according to President Richard M. Nixon in a 1969 speech, had grown weary of the black community’s agitating, especially after the ratification of civil rights laws in the 1960s (Kinder & Sanders 1996). What the silent majority failed to recognize, however, was that many in the black community thought of the riots as a protest against accumulated grievances and as a mechanism to spotlight problems in the community (Sears & McConahay 1973). In fact, those in the black community who subscribed to black solidarity and social justice were more sympathetic than others to the riots (Aberbach & Walker 1970). Likewise, the black community was driven to embrace the Black Power movement, in part, by its experience with discrimination (Aberbach & Walker 1970). Even so, shortly after the riots, a white backlash ensued, driven by racial resentment, a version of modern racism (Sears & Kinder 1981, Kinder & Sanders 1996). Countering this backlash was a web of community activists at the local level. In Cleveland, Detroit, Philadelphia, Chicago, Oakland, Los Angeles, and elsewhere, these activists fought labor market and residential discrimination, as well as police brutality, well into the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Sugrue 1996, Countryman 2006, Rhomberg 2004). In each case, these forms of discrimination were at least partially driven by OFR, modern racism, or negative stereotypes of blacks. These, in turn, are associated with authoritarianism.

In the 1990s, the focus shifted to Latinos. First came a slew of California legislation, beginning with Proposition 187 in 1994. Proposition 187 was a ballot initiative crafted with the purpose of denying so-called illegal aliens the use of nonemergency medical care and access to public education. Race and racial threat had much to do with the initiative passing (Campbell et al. 2006). The real story, however, is what motivated the ballot initiative in the first place: blatantly racist tropes. As Santa Ana (2002) demonstrates, California media, especially the *Los Angeles Times*, often referred to Latinos as parasites, as carriers of disease, and as animals. A few years later, in 2005, HR 4437 passed the lower chamber of Congress. Among other things, the bill aimed to increase the penalty for entering the United States illegally, in addition to penalizing employers of such immigrants and anyone who rendered them aid of any kind. Often, such anti-immigration measures are a product of perceived racial threat and anxiety on the part of whites (e.g., Brader et al. 2008). Needless to say, threat and anxiety are constitutive of authoritarianism (Stenner 2005). In response, Latinos staged nationwide marches, galvanized by their sense of collective outrage (e.g., Barreto et al. 2008, Zepeda-Millan 2017). The Senate failed to pass the resolution.

CONCLUSION

We have observed authoritarianism from two vantage points, using different units of analysis. The first is from comparative politics, in which states and political systems are objects of inquiry. Here, we examined the impact of authoritarianism on race in the United States. The criteria for an authoritarian regime fits the American case, with commensurate results: social oppression and political repression. The second is from political psychology, where the individual and group are

objects of inquiry. A profile of aggression, convention, and submission typifies the authoritarian predisposition, one associated with generalized intolerance, including prejudice. Even though one approach resides at the macro level of analysis and the other at the micro level, we think it is reasonable to say that macro and micro authoritarianism are linked. Support in the mass public is likely a necessity if an authoritarian regime is to have a chance of taking root. Where else is an aspiring dictator more likely to identify his base, if not among those craving a strong leader who will help them offset the anxiety they feel?

This brings us to our final point. What is it that ultimately ties macro-level authoritarianism to its micro-level counterpart? One possibility is generalized intolerance. Indeed, both the original version of authoritarianism (Adorno et al. 1950) and the most thorough statement of late (Stenner 2005) make this claim. However, there are at least two reasons to reject the generalized intolerance explanation. First, we know that researchers' conception of micro authoritarianism, at least as it is measured by child-rearing practices, fails to capture authoritarianism in the black community (Perez & Hetherington 2014). Further, for blacks, it is only weakly correlated with other measures of intolerance. The same cannot be said of white respondents. This suggests that the relationship between generalized intolerance and authoritarian positions holds only for whites. Beyond this, for reasons we have already indicated, the cultural referent for the society to which authoritarians are tethered is white. Second, because authoritarian enclaves were indissolubly linked to Jim Crow, macro-level authoritarianism was expressly antiblack. By our reckoning, one of the traits macro and micro versions of authoritarians share, at least in the American context, is white supremacy. POC, specifically blacks, contested it during Jim Crow and continue to oppose it now, after the Second Reconstruction (the period in the 1960s during which the civil rights legislation was passed).

As we move forward, the intersection of authoritarianism and race will remain a topic of discussion. How can this not be the case, given the current occupant of the White House? Also, as we have argued, authoritarianism in the United States is raced: It belongs to white people. Even when Trump departs 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, the people who support him will remain. Furthermore, the country will continue to march toward the demographic point at which whites are no longer the numerically dominant race, a point that will be reached no later than 2044. Thus, it comes as no surprise that scholarship has shown that those who are most concerned with the United States becoming a majority-minority country supported Trump overwhelmingly (Major et al. 2016). Indeed, as long as racial threat remains a fixture in American life, the specter of authoritarianism will continue haunting American democracy. By the same token, POC will refuse to sit idly by: They will continue to join the battle.

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