

## Authoritarianism - the secret ingredient in Trump & Brexit

The American media, over the past year, has been trying to work out something of a mystery: why is the Republican electorate supporting a far-right, orange-toned populist with no real political experience, who espouses extreme and often bizarre views? How has Donald Trump, seemingly out of nowhere, suddenly become so popular?

What's made Trump's rise even more puzzling is that his support seems to cross demographic lines — education, income, age, even religiosity — that usually demarcate candidates. And whereas most Republican candidates might draw strong support from just one segment of the party base, such as Southern evangelicals or coastal moderates, Trump does surprisingly well from the Gulf Coast of Florida to the towns of upstate New York.

Perhaps strangest of all, it wasn't just Trump but *his supporters who seemed to have come out of nowhere*, suddenly expressing, in large numbers, ideas far more extreme than anything that has risen to such popularity in recent memory. In South Carolina, a CBS News exit poll found that 75 percent of Republican voters supported banning Muslims from the United States. A [PPP poll](#) found that a third of Trump voters support banning gays and lesbians from the country.

*Twenty percent said Lincoln shouldn't have freed the slaves!*

Even with Trump's casual and repeated insults towards women, while 54% of women overall voted for Hillary, *62% of non-college educated white women voted for Donald.*

Whatever you think of Trump's victory and Brexit, there is little doubt that *something has entered the mainstream that smacks of viciousness and hostility*. It seems certain that this 'something' was already present among us, that now has permission to express itself.

Where does it come from? Clearly not all the 59 million, who voted for Trump, nor the 17 million for Brexit are bad people. But do they possess some trait or characteristic that leads them to these new levels of hostility and vilification of other parts of their societies? Is there a disposition in their personal make-ups that has them lean towards a punitive solution to our current difficulties?

The answer, shown in studies both in the UK and the US is 'Yes, they do - and there is such a characteristic.

So what is it?

It is known as **Authoritarianism**. And we have been here before. We first met it among the supporters of the fascist movements and political parties of the 1930's. It was the characteristic that allowed the Nazis and Mussolini to purge, imprison and torture groups within their own countries. And to enrol their own populations in seeking out and denouncing members of these groups. The

rise in hate crime and abusive public and private attacks on minorities in both the UK and US suggest that this is gathering pace in 2016.

Authoritarianism was explored after World War 2 in a famous series of experiments by Stanley Milgram. [Compliance with Authority](#)

In these experiments ordinary members of the public were encouraged to give potentially lethal electric shocks to strangers on the instructions of an 'official' who was in charge of the experiment. They complied to a surprising degree. At this time Adorno developed an explanation of authoritarianism as a personality syndrome, based in Freudian psychology.

Adorno's book, "*The Authoritarian Personality*" invented a set of criteria by which to define this authoritarian trait, and ranked these criteria and their intensity in any given person on what it called the '[F scale](#)' (F for [fascist](#))."<sup>[1]</sup> The authoritarian type Adorno identified can be defined by nine traits that were believed to cluster together as the result of childhood experiences. These traits are:

1. conventionalism,
2. authoritarian submission and aggression,
3. [anti-intellectualism](#),
4. anti-[intraception](#) (a dislike of subjectivity and imagination),
5. [superstition](#) and
6. [stereotypy](#),
7. power and "toughness",
8. destructiveness and cynicism,
9. projectivity, and exaggerated concerns over sex.<sup>[2][3]</sup>

Though strongly criticized for bias and methodology,<sup>[4][5]</sup> the book was highly influential in American social sciences, particularly in the first decade after its publication: "No volume published since the war in the field of social psychology has had a greater impact on the direction of the actual empirical work being carried on in the universities today."<sup>[6]</sup>

You will also find further exploration of this trait in the well-known Zimbardo Prison Experiments, which had to be abandoned early, so vile was the treatment of the prisoners by their gaolers - who had been their classmates until the experiment began!

<http://www.simplypsychology.org/zimbardo.html>

**What, exactly, is this construct that seems to predict so many preferences and behaviours?**

Today we consider **authoritarianism** as something created by a tension between belief in order and control and belief in personal freedom. In other words, it occurs when the belief in control exceeds and dominates the belief in autonomy, choice, freedom of thought and action.

This tension between freedom and conformity - and the resultant attitudes and behaviours - are learned in childhood, from parents and teachers - and interactions with the society and culture around us. In another place we have described the emergence of autonomy, particularly from the 1960's and distinguished it as the 'trend of our times.'

<http://www.langmaidpractice.com/the-trend-of-our-times/>

This autonomy has overwhelmed for many the sense of tradition, conservatism and social order, as people have felt free to pursue their own beliefs and preferences in their attitudes and behaviour. Many of today's 'boomers' forget how much they treasured the permissiveness of their own youth in the 1960's and 70's.

This tension between the values of autonomy and social conformity may well be a universal aspect of living with other people. Research by Schwarz and others demonstrates that this is a single dimension, with a cluster of conformity values at one end and self-direction at the other:

|           |       |           |
|-----------|-------|-----------|
| Autono    | ----- | Confor    |
| my        | ----- | mity      |
| self      |       | security  |
| direction |       |           |
| freedom   |       | conserv   |
|           |       | atism     |
| stimulati |       | tradition |
| on        |       |           |

Although most of us would struggle to articulate a personal philosophy that reconciles the conflicting values of social conformity and autonomy, the tug of war between these two goals will result in people adopting ***an attitude to the world that reflects their preferred balance between them.***

Note that this dimension is defined by the relative priorities attached to the values at each end of the scale. In the abstract people might place a high value on personal autonomy, particularly in individualistic societies like the UK and USA. But ***it is the relative weight that people give to each of the extremes when forced to confront the trade-off between them that determines an authoritarian as distinct from a liberal position.***

This draws us to the conclusion that something has mobilised popular opinion towards a greater priority for conformity. Drivers include the loss of singularity in religion, the loss of work, the loss of economic improvements (pay stagnation), the loss of homogeneity, the loss of potency as we age, the increase in diversity all around us.

We have at the same time been through an extended period of neoliberalism, a kind of economic autonomy, but for the majority this has not worked to sustain their prosperity, influence or status. Wilkinson and Pickett explore this thoroughly in 'The Spirit Level'.

Interestingly, a key characteristic of authoritarianism is not an attack on the leaders - those who might have brought us to this place - bankers, CEO's, evangelists, populists - for that threatens the fabric even more, but an assault on those who are different *and weaker than us*: immigrants, foreigners, women, students (who do not see the world this way as their voting patterns demonstrate.) In this way, authoritarianism is tainted by a form of cowardice and narcissism or extreme self-interest.

Every authoritarian state in history has been led by a dictator, someone who has directed the hatred of those terrified by their loss of status and the breakdown of the existing order onto the chosen minorities. Jews and Slavs for example in Nazi Germany. Trump has shown every sign of being this kind of charismatic leader, an outsider from his own party, who is willing to orchestrate and direct popular rage. He is much more known for what he is against than what he is for, a typical characteristic of an authoritarian leader.

But before we get our sabres and swords out, remember that all of us are caught up in this tension between autonomy and conformity. Here is a test that will score your own level of Authoritarianism, try it and see:

<http://personality-testing.info/tests/RWAS/>

[Higher scores indicate more right-wing authoritarianism. My score for right-wing authoritarianism was 13.64%. Compare it with your own! Don't cheat.]

Right-wing authoritarians want society and social interactions structured in ways that increase uniformity and minimize diversity. In order to achieve that, they tend to be in favour of social control, coercion, and the use of group authority to place constraints on the behaviours of people such as political dissidents, intellectuals and ethnic minorities. These constraints might include restrictions on immigration, limits on free speech and association and laws regulating moral behaviour. It is the willingness to take actions that lead to increased social uniformity that makes right-wing authoritarianism more than just a personal dislike of difference.

Right-wing authoritarianism is characterized by obedience to authority, moral absolutism, racial and ethnic prejudice, and intolerance and punitiveness towards those who express difference, either through race, skin colour, language or ideas. In parenting, right-wing authoritarians value children's obedience, neatness, and good manners.

You can find a thorough exploration of the emergence or more accurately 'activation' of the Authoritarian trend in the US, here, together with figures that illustrate its prominence among those

who voted for Trump.

<http://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424/trump-authoritarianis>

Authoritarians prioritize social order and hierarchies, which bring a sense of control to a chaotic world. Challenges to that order — diversity, influx of outsiders, breakdown of the old order — are experienced as personally threatening because they risk upending the status quo order they equate with basic security.

This is, after all, a time of social change in America. The country is becoming more diverse, which means that many white Americans are confronting race in a way they have never had to before. Those changes have been happening for a long time, but in recent years they have become more visible and harder to ignore. And they are coinciding with economic trends that have squeezed non-college educated white working Americans as never before.

[All Hollowed Out, the lonely poverty of America's white working class](#)

Their rage is understandable; their solution - directing their venom at people even less fortunate than themselves - is akin to shooting yourself whilst aiming your gun at someone else. It will not produce results without legislation to redistribute wealth either through taxes or welfare. It looks as though Trump will go in exactly the opposite direction, he will decrease both. Only the rich will really benefit from tax cuts, they have most to gain. Only the poor will suffer from welfare cuts. They have most to lose.

Unless he is moderated by wiser men (there will be few women in Trump's government!) more trouble lies ahead.

For those interested in the prevalence of this trait among Brexit voters, see here: [Authoritarianism in the UK and Brexit](#)