Do Authoritarians Support Political Violence?

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ABSTRACT Research has linked the authoritarian personality with support for political violence, including violence against the government. However, support for political violence is simultaneously a measure of and an outcome of the authoritarian personality, and one key component (submission to authority) is the antithesis of one key measure of political violence (violence against authority). This article makes three contributions. First, we accentuate the importance of using exogenous measures of the authoritarian personality when estimating its effect on support for political violence. Second, leveraging data from an original survey and the American National Election Studies, we find that the relationship between authoritarianism and support for violence is conditional: it can be positive, negative, or null, depending on who is in control of government and the specificity of political-violence measures. Third, we argue that another concept—the securitarian personality—might better predict support for violence. Access to firearms—which we argue is downstream from securitarianism—consistently predicts support for political violence.

The past decade has seen renewed attention to the role of the authoritarian personality in contemporary American politics (Hermann et al. 2023; MacWilliams 2016; Morgan and Shanahan 2017), particularly its role in fomenting political extremism (Inguanzo, Mateos, and Gil de Zúñiga 2022; Luttig 2017). Speculation about the link between authoritarianism[1] and political violence accelerated in the aftermath of the riots at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 (Perlstein 2021).

Nevertheless, although some research links the authoritarian personality with support for political violence (Armaly and Enders 2022), there are inherent tensions in the logic of this supposed relationship. Although democratic backsliding and authoritarianism often are used interchangeably, one measure of democratic backsliding is support for the use of force against the government and others (Bartels 2020; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Moreover, the dimensions of the authoritarian personality traditionally include conventionalism, aggression toward the out-group, and submission to authority. This means that (1) supporting violence against out-groups is a measure of authoritarianism; and (2) although submission to authority is a component of the authoritarian personality, political violence also is often understood and operationalized as support for violence against political authority.

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In the literature, therefore, support for political violence is simultaneously a measure of and an outcome of the authoritarian personality, and one key component (i.e., submission to authority) is the antithesis of one key measure of political violence (i.e., violence against authority). The confusion likely stems from treating what are two distinct literatures as the same: authoritarianism as a personality trait and authoritarianism as support for certain types of government policies or regimes.

We begin the analysis of this problem by providing clarity to one particular claim: that authoritarianism as a personality trait predicts support for political violence. This article makes three contributions. First, we accentuate the importance of using fully exogenous measures of the authoritarian personality (i.e., the child-rearing measures) when estimating its effect on support for political violence. Our second contribution is empirical: Using this measure, does authoritarianism consistently predict support for political violence? Drawing on data from a 2018 original survey, as well as the 2016, 2020, and 2024 American National Election Studies (ANES), our results reveal that the relationship between authoritarianism is conditional. That is, the relationship can be positive, negative, or null, depending on who is in control of the government and whether questions gauge support for political violence in general terms or violence against the government specifically. Third, we find that another factor—access to firearms—consistently predicts support for political violence, regardless of who is in power or how the question is worded. We argue that gun access is downstream from the securitarian personality, which is characterized by support for insider-friendly policies including the strengthening of national defenses, restricting immigration, and protecting the culture from what is perceived as moral decay (Hibbing 2020).

AUTHORITARIANISM AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE: ISSUES WITH THEORY AND MEASUREMENT

There are mixed results in the literature regarding the link between the authoritarian personality and support for political violence. Whereas trait aggression is associated with support for political violence, authoritarian personality—measured using the Feldman and Stenner (1997) parenting measures—is not correlated with trait aggression (Kalmoe 2014). Kalmoe and Mason (2022, 164–67) also found that trait aggression significantly predicts partisan political violence; although they do not measure authoritarianism per se, they described those possessing the traits correlated with support for violence as authoritarians. However, their partisan political-violence scale includes measures that gauge support of violence against out-group political officials and, more abstractly, the use of violence to achieve political goals. Their political-violence scale in part (likely by design) is a dimension of authoritarianism—that is, aggression toward the out-group (see the online appendix). In other words, supporting political violence is what makes one an authoritarian.

Using support for violence to measure right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) is common practice, but this complicates efforts to demonstrate that authoritarians support violence. Faragó, Kende, and Krekó (2019), for instance, leveraged items from the traditional Altemeyer RWA scale, to predict aggression toward outgroups. Although it is unclear which RWA items Faragó and colleagues used, the traditional RWA scale includes items that implicitly and explicitly gauge support for aggression toward outgroups (Altemeyer 1981). Conversely, Armaly and Enders (2022) found that authoritarianism is one of six variables that predict support for political violence. In this case, support for political violence is predicted by authoritarianism rather than being a measure of it. Armaly and Ender's (2022) authoritarian measure is a relatively new instrument, developed by Heller et al. (2020), but it consists of standard elements of RWA—including support for submission to traditional authorities and consequences for troublemakers in society.[2]

This issue is not new—previous studies pointed out that measures of authoritarianism (namely, the Altemeyer RWA scale) have incorporated attitudes and behaviors that theories predict should be downstream of authoritarianism as a predisposition, such as prejudice and intolerance toward outgroups (Feldman 2003). Violence against the government is not an exception; the RWA scale scores those who agree that it is better to "trust the judgment of proper authorities in government and religion than to listen to the noisy rabble-rousers in our society who are trying to create doubt in people's minds" as more authoritarian (Altemeyer 1981). Perhaps "proper" is the operative word, but the RWA scale also places those who reject "challenging our government" and who "do what the authorities tell us" as more authoritarian. It is difficult to reconcile the unprecedented assault on the US Capitol—the historical seat of Congress—with the traditionalism and submissiveness that the RWA scale associates with authoritarianism (Perlstein 2021).

This problem is not limited to the news media labeling insurrectionists as authoritarians; the link between RWA and support for violence against the government is explicit in academic literature. Research links those who score high on RWA with the belief that "the people convicted for their role in the violent January 6 attacks on the US Capitol are really patriots who are being held hostage by the government," and "American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country" (Public Religion Research Institute 2024). Armaly and Enders (2022), whose RWA-inspired authoritarianism measure predicts support for political violence, measure support for political violence using respondents' agreement with three statements on 1–5 Likert scales. Notably, one of the statements is support for political violence toward government: "Violence is sometimes an acceptable way for Americans to express their disagreement with the government." Another statement is more ambiguous but similarly invokes the notion that violence like that of January 6 is permissible: "It is acceptable to use violence in advancing political goals these days."

The problem is not limited to only the RWA scale. Other, arguably more valid measures of authoritarianism—such as the Feldman and Stenner (1997) parenting items—associate support for obedience and "good" behavior and manners with authoritarianism. Hibbing (2022) explicitly identified the issue of asserting authoritarians as the source of violence against government, noting that the activities of the January 6 insurrectionists—destroying iconic national property, aggression toward law enforcement, and threats made to the then–Vice President of the United States—cannot reasonably be qualified as reflecting traditionalism and submission to authority.

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IS THE RELATIONSHIP CONDITIONAL?

There are clear inherent contradictions in an authoritarian supporting violence against the government, both conceptually and in measurement. However, this does not mean that we would never see a relationship between authoritarianism and political violence—rather, the nature of the relationship may depend on the questions we use and when we ask them.

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Because the child-rearing measure of authoritarianism does not incorporate measures of violence and is still recognized as a valid exogenous measure of authoritarianism (Engelhardt, Feldman, and Hetherington 2021), it is an appropriate way to measure the authoritarian personality. The measure better captures the conceptual tradeoff between autonomy and social cohesion that is the basis for attitudes indexed by RWA. Moreover, it avoids an overlap between the independent and dependent variables, given that RWA operationalizations often include violence in statements.

However, whether this measure predicts support for political violence should depend on two factors: (1) does support for political violence explicitly mention the government; and (2) who is running the government at the time the question is asked. Another study found that the degree of endorsement of political violence depends on the clarity of targets (Clifford, Lopez, and Lothamer forthcoming). We therefore might expect that the effect of authoritarianism on violence will be conditional, depending on whether authoritarians perceive those who are in charge of the government to be legitimate. In the contemporary American context, and according to research that connects support for Republicans with the child-rearing measure of authoritarianism, the relationship might reverse depending on which political party controls the White House (Hetherington and Weiler 2018; MacWilliams 2016—but see Luttig 2021 for a rebuttal to this claim).

What about when measures of political violence do not specify the government? One issue with many measures of support for political violence is that they ask about general support without offering context, leaving a respondent to infer what "violence" means and, ostensibly, at whom or what the violence will be aimed (Westwood et al. 2022). We suspect that if the effect of authoritarianism on violence against the government is conditional, it will not reliably predict support for generic political violence either because some authoritarian partisans may infer that this means violence against the in-group controlling the White House. Thus, even the use of an exogenous measure of authoritarianism will not result in a consistent relationship with support for political violence.

SECURITARIAN PERSONALITY

If not authoritarian, then how might we classify those who consistently support violence against the government or otherwise? Hibbing (2020, 2022) developed an alternative concept to describe supporters of "strong leaders" who do not exhibit obedience to authority: "securitarians." According to Hibbing (2020, 2022), securitarians are motivated to achieve insider-friendly policies, including the strengthening of national defenses, restricting immigration, and protecting the culture from what they perceive as moral decay. Hibbing (2020) measures the securitarian personality through agreement with the following statements: "Projecting weakness is just about the worst thing a person could do"; "I think a good deal about the security of my family and my country"; and "'Being prepared' to face threats is the best motto for living one's life." Hibbing's (2020) securitarian worldview statements also include: "A central goal for our country should be to become so strong that outsiders will realize it does not make sense to attack us"; "If we are not vigilant, we will quickly be victimized by criminals, immigrants, and by the power of foreign countries"; and "Just about the worst thing for a country is to be perceived as weak." If this account is accurate—that securitarianism better predicts the types of attitudes and behaviors associated with authoritarianism—then we should expect to see specific attitudes and behaviors associated with personal security and the projection of strength to predict support for political violence.

DATA AND MEASURES

We leveraged data from an original survey (N=3,103) fielded in September 2018 (Nielsen et al. 2024), as well as data from the 2016, 2020, and 2024 ANES (Gervais et al. 2025). The original survey used a sample provided by the vendor Qualtrics, which recruited the nationally representative panel of randomly selected US adults with an oversample of gun owners using a specialized recruitment campaign. Qualtrics partners with online panel providers to supply a network of diverse, quality respondents. Each sample from the panel base is proportioned to the general population and then randomized before the survey is deployed. The models we employed use weighted data that (1) correct for the oversampling of gun owners; and (2) more closely match population estimates on key characteristics including gender, race, age, and region. All participants were compensated at rates that were fair in both local and global contexts and no groups were affected differentially.

Leveraging the 2018 original survey and the ANES data had several advantages. First, all four surveys included the Feldman and Stenner (1997) child-rearing measure of authoritarianism. (Details on the measure are included in the online appendix.) Second, we were able to assess whether support for political violence was conditional on who controlled the government: Democrats in the White House in 2016 (Barack Obama) and 2024 (Joe Biden) and a Republican in 2018 and 2020 (Donald Trump). Third, we could determine if explicitly mentioning

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support for political violence against the government made a difference. Because the 2018 and 2020 surveys both took place during Trump's two presidencies, the 2018 survey included a measure of "support for political violence" that explicitly referenced the government. The survey asked respondents: "Do you think that it is ever justified for citizens to take violent action against the government, or is it never justified?" Respondents could choose "never" (0) or "justified" (1). The ANES question for 2020 (as well as for 2016 and 2024) gauging support for political violence does not mention violence against the government. Instead, it asks: "How much do you feel it is justified for people to use violence to pursue their political goals in this country?" with answers ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great deal).

Fourth, although neither of the datasets contained any of the statements that Hibbing (2020) used to measure the securitarian personality or worldview, they did include those that measured gun ownership. Hibbing (2020, 69–71, 140) found that securitarianism is associated with gun ownership and several pro-gun positions. This is consistent with preparing for outsider threats and "defending the castle," so to speak (Hibbing 2020, 69). Thus, we could determine whether behavior and attitudes that are downstream from the securitarian personality and worldview indeed were associated with support for political violence. For the 2018 survey analyses, we gauged gun ownership with a question that asked: "Do you personally own any guns (NOT including air guns, such as paintball, BB, or pellet guns)?" (1=yes, 2=no). For the ANES analyses, we used a gun-access measure (1=access to gun, 0=no access).[3] We also included several demographic controls, including age, education, female identity (gender), and nonwhite identity (race). We also believed it was relevant to control for political ideology and party identity. In several robustness-check models (see the online appendix), we also included other control variables, such as income, region, marital status, combat military service, and government trust. (Details about these variables are included in the online appendix.)

REPUBLICAN-CONTROL MODELS (2018 AND 2020)

We first assessed the degree to which authoritarian and securitarian traits predict attitudes about political violence during the years when a Republican, Donald Trump, controlled the White House (2018 and 2020). The 2018 survey asked whether political violence was ever justified, resulting in a binary outcome, whereas the 2020 survey used a multipoint scale to capture respondents' level of agreement with political violence. To ensure comparability across surveys, we ran a linear model across both measures.[4] Table 1 displays the results from the linear regression models predicting support for political violence. In 2018 (model 1), authoritarianism had a negative relationship with the belief that violent action against the government is never justified. Substantively, a one-unit increase on the authoritarian index was associated with a 6.4-percentage-point decrease in the probability that a respondent supported violence against the government.[5]

Authoritarianism also was negative in the 2020 results but did not reach conventional levels of statistical significance (model 2). The inconsistency in effects across the 2018 and 2020 surveys likely was due to differences in how each survey measured support for political violence. The 2018 survey specified violence against the government, meaning to the extent that a relationship between authoritarianism and Republican identity exists, the measure likely captured support for violence against a Republican-controlled government. Conversely, the 2020 survey asked about using violence as a means to pursue political goals. Whereas some Republican authoritarians may have interpreted this as referring to the government, others may have seen it as violence directed toward out-groups. The ambiguity in the target of violence likely obscured any consistent relationship between authoritarianism and support for political violence.

Whereas authoritarianism showed no positive association with political violence in either the 2018 or 2020 survey, behavior downstream of securitarian personalities consistently predicted support for political violence regardless of how the question was framed. Models 3 and 4 in table 1 reveal that gun ownership (2018) and gun access (2020) both exerted positive effects on support for political violence.[6] In model 3, having access to a gun was associated with an 8.9-percentage-point increase in the probability of endorsing violence against the government. When applying the broader political violence measure in model 4, gun access was associated with a 0.16-unit increase in support for political violence relative to respondents without access, which represents a 12% increase relative to the weighted sample mean of 1.32. Although a 0.16-unit increase represents only 4% of the full range of the 1–5 scale, the distribution is highly skewed toward rejection of violence, with more than 82% of respondents selecting the lowest value (i.e., "not at all"). In this context, even modest shifts away from the overwhelming consensus represent meaningful

Table 1

Authoritarianism, Gun Access, and Support for Political Violence with Republican Control of the White House (2018 Survey and 2020 ANES)

	2018 Model 1	2020 Model 2	2018 Model 3	2020 Model 4
Authoritarianism	–0.064***	0.015	–0.063***	0.013
	(0.007)	(0.014)	(0.007)	(0.013)
Gun Access			0.089***	0.163**
			(0.018)	(0.069)
Education	0.015**	–0.104***	0.014**	–0.102***
	(0.007)	(0.019)	(0.007)	(0.018)
Age	–0.007***	–0.007***	–0.007***	–0.007***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Female	–0.085***	0.015	–0.085***	0.022
	(0.018)	(0.023)	(0.018)	(0.023)
Nonwhite	0.029	0.218***	0.035	0.225***
	(0.023)	(0.040)	(0.023)	(0.040)
Ideology	–0.026***	0.042**	–0.021***	0.046***
	(0.007)	(0.017)	(0.007)	(0.017)
Party Identity	–0.009	0.003	–0.006	0.002
	(0.006)	(0.017)	(0.006)	(0.017)
Constant	0.967***	1.559***	0.892***	1.520***
	(0.048)	(0.079)	(0.051)	(0.080)
N	3,026	5,878	3,026	5,862

Notes: Robust standard errors are in parentheses. **p<0.05, ***p< 0.01.

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behavioral differentiation. The consistency in the effect of securitarian-related behaviors indicates that securitarian attitudes operate independently of political context. Whereas authoritarians' endorsement for violence was dependent on whether they were thinking about out-groups or their own political allies, securitarians supported political violence regardless of the political target evoked by the question.

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DEMOCRATIC-CONTROL MODELS (2016 AND 2024)

Next, we assessed whether authoritarianism had the same level of effect on political violence in years when a Democratic leader was president. We used ANES surveys under two different Democratic leaders to ensure that the effect was not driven by attitudes specific to Obama or Biden. Linear regression models that predict support for political violence are shown in table 2. Contrary to the Republican-controlled years, authoritarianism was consistently associated with support for political violence with both coefficients in the 2016 and 2024 models, attaining conventional levels of statistical significance. In 2016 (model 1), a one-unit increase in authoritarianism was associated with a 0.032-percentage-point increase in support for political violence; in 2024 (model 2), the effect was slightly larger at 0.040 percentage points. Substantively, with a mean level of support for political violence of 1.30 in 2016 and 1.34 in 2024, every one-unit increase in political violence represents approximately 2.5% to 3.1% of the average level of support for political violence. The positive effect contrasts with the negative or nonsignificant effects observed during Republican control, suggesting that authoritarian attitudes toward political violence are highly contextual and depend on which party holds power.

Table 2

Authoritarianism, Gun Access, and Support for Political Violence with Democratic Control of the White House (2016 and 2024 ANES)

	2016 Model 1	2024 Model 2	2016 Model 3	2024 Model 4
Authoritarianism	0.032**	0.040**	0.027*	0.040**
	(0.015)	(0.017)	(0.015)	(0.017)
Gun Access			0.335***	0.354***
			(0.109)	(0.118)
Education	–0.103***	–0.095***	–0.101***	–0.086***
	(0.023)	(0.024)	(0.023)	(0.024)
Age	0.005***	–0.005***	0.005***	–0.005***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Female	–0.047	–0.040	–0.045	–0.025
	(0.034)	(0.041)	(0.034)	(0.040)
Nonwhite	0.255***	0.176***	0.248***	0.174***
	(0.064)	(0.051)	(0.063)	(0.050)
Ideology	0.020	0.017	0.024	0.025
	(0.022)	(0.024)	(0.022)	(0.024)
Party Identity	0.005	–0.009	0.009	–0.011
	(0.024)	(0.026)	(0.023)	(0.027)
Constant	–9.325***	1.587***	–8.883***	1.491***
	(2.112)	(0.126)	(2.052)	(0.123)
N	2593	3723	2585	3718

Notes: Robust standard errors are in parentheses. **p<0.05, *** p<0.01.

As in the Republican models, securitarian behavior was associated positively with attitudes toward political violence.[7] Models 3 (2016) and 4 (2024) present evidence that gun access was a consistent predictor of political violence support across both years of Democratic leadership. Substantively, respondents with access to a gun supported political violence approximately 0.34 units more in both 2016 and 2024, with almost identical effect sizes (0.335 and 0.354, respectively). A 0.34-percentage-point increase associated with gun access represents a 26% increase over the 2016 political violence mean of 1.30 and a similarly sized shift in 2024. This indicates that those with gun access are markedly more supportive of political violence despite widespread rejection of political violence by the broader population.

These effects indicate that behaviors associated with the securitarian personality maintain their predictive power irrespective of which party controls the presidency. Moreover, authoritarianism was no longer significant at conventional levels in 2016 (model 3), when gun access was included. The stability of the gun-access effect across both Republican and Democratic administrations indicates that securitarian attitudes operate independently of political context. Whereas authoritarians' endorsement for violence was conditional on who holds power (and was not consistently significant), securitarians consistently endorsed violence regardless of the political leadership. This suggests that individuals who consistently support political violence may be classified better as securitarians than authoritarians.

CONCLUSION

There is much speculation about a link between authoritarianism and support for violence against the government. We advance research on this question in several ways. Our first contribution is theoretical. We point out that support for political violence has been treated simultaneously as a measure of and an outcome of the authoritarian personality. Use of exogenous measures of authoritarianism, such as the child-rearing battery, therefore is essential.

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Because submission to authority is a core component of authoritarianism, it would be contradictory for authoritarians to consistently support violence against authority (i.e., the government). This suggests that authoritarianism's relationship with securitarianism, future scholarship should develop more direct measurement approaches to establish this link. Nevertheless, if it is validated as a proxy for securitarianism, gun access/ownership would provide researchers with a measure that is both prevalent in

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support for violence should be conditional. Authoritarianism should not predict violence against the government if those in power are viewed as legitimate authorities. Indeed, our second contribution is finding that authoritarianism had a negative relationship with support for violence against the government in 2018, during Trump's first term in the White House. However, we also find that when measures of support for violence do not specify the government as a target—as in the 2020 ANES, also fielded during Trump's first presidency—this relationship does not exist. Likewise, we find that authoritarianism predicted support for political violence using data from the 2016 and 2024 ANES, when Democrats controlled the White House.

We have suggested that the wording of the measures supporting violence explains why authoritarianism has a negative relationship with support for violence in 2018 but not in 2020. However, there are several other potential explanations. The attacks on the legitimacy of the 2020 election in the run-up to Election Day by the incumbent president could have led authoritarian supporters to be more likely to endorse violence in 2020 than they were in Trump's first term (Colvin 2020; Haberman, Corasaniti, and Qiu 2020). Moreover, there are many differences between the 2018 and 2020 data collections beyond the wording of the dependent variables, including sampling approach, mix of mode, and context. That said, our results are consistent with findings that the degree of endorsement of political violence depends on the clarity of targets (Clifford, Lopez, and Lothamer forthcoming). That is, if authoritarian respondents are not sure if the measure is asking about violence against a detested out-group or the government led by a president they support, we would expect to see a null relationship between authoritarianism and support for violence.

If it is the case that the relationship between authoritarianism and support for political violence is dependent on the partisanship of the presidency (in the American context) and the specificity of political-violence measures, then might there be an alternative measure that more consistently predicts support for political violence? Our final contribution is the identification that gun ownership and access consistently predict increased support for violence against the government. This gun ownership/access measure, we argue, should be downstream from an alternative personality type: securitarianism.

However, additional investigation is needed to confirm whether this is the case. Securitarianism describes supporters of "strong leaders" who do not exhibit obedience to authority and who value personal security and projecting strength. Because gun access and ownership represent only indirect measures of survey research and can be included in survey instruments with relative ease.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit http://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096525101625.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Harvard Dataverse at https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/S9ZZC1.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. The term "authoritarianism" may be confusing because it can refer to both a regime type and the tendency to exhibit authoritarian personality traits (e.g., submission to authority) (Parker and Towler 2019). We use the term in the latter sense.
2. We include their full authoritarianism scale and support for political violence index in the online appendix.
3. The ANES asks only about whether someone in the household owns a gun rather than whether the respondent does; therefore, we did not correct for oversampling of gun owners. We also controlled for the same set of demographic and political variables as in the 2018 models.
4. The results are robust to modeling political violence as a binary outcome in both surveys using logistic regression (see the online appendix).
5. This relationship is robust to the inclusion of other control variables, including income, attitudes toward the government, marital status, whether the respondent has children, and combat military service (see the online appendix).
6. These results are robust to the exclusion of authoritarianism (see table A.6 in the online appendix).
7. The significance of securitarianism is robust to the exclusion of authoritarianism from the models (see table A.7 in the online appendix).

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