

# A Tale of Two Democrats: How Authoritarianism Divides the Democratic Party

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Authoritarianism has been predominantly used in American politics as a predictor of Republican identification and conservative policy preferences. We argue that this approach has neglected the role authoritarianism plays among Democrats and how it can operate within political parties regardless of their ideological orientation. Drawing from three distinct sets of data, we demonstrate the impact of authoritarianism in the 2016 Democratic Party's primaries. Authoritarianism consistently predicts differences in primary voting among Democrats, particularly support for Hillary Clinton over Bernie Sanders. This effect is robust across various model specifications including controls for ideology, partisan strength, and other predispositions. These results highlight the potential of authoritarianism to shape leadership preferences within the Democratic Party. We advocate for a reconsideration of authoritarianism as a disposition with meaningful consequences for intraparty dynamics and conclude with practical implications regarding the future of the Democratic Party.

Although the 2016 election brought authoritarianism into mainstream American political discourse (MacWilliams 2016), the dominant narrative focused almost exclusively on Republicans who consistently fall on the high end of the authoritarianism scale (Federico and Tagar 2014; Hetherington and Weiler 2009). While it is true that high authoritarians have sorted en masse into the Republican Party, it is a misconception that authoritarianism has little to no significance within the Democratic Party. Although Republicans tend to exhibit higher levels of authoritarianism than Democrats, there is substantial variation in authoritarianism among Democrats. We argue that disregarding these intraparty

divisions provides an incomplete account of authoritarianism's role in the current political landscape.

This article addresses these concerns by demonstrating that authoritarianism not only exists within the Democratic Party but exerted strong and divisive effects on voting preferences within the 2016 primary between relatively moderate, establishment candidate Hillary Clinton and progressive, populist candidate Bernie Sanders. Specifically, high authoritarian Democrats supported Clinton, while low authoritarian Democrats supported Sanders. We speculate that this authoritarian divide will further complicate the Democratic leadership's attempts to unify their party's base in future elections.

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### AUTHORITARIANISM AND THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

Authoritarianism reflects a spectrum of psychological group orientations ranging from individual autonomy to social conformity (Feldman 2003; Feldman and Stenner 1997; Stenner 2005), where high authoritarians possess dispositional needs for order, certainty, and security and adherence to conventional, established institutions (Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Jost et al. 2003). Accordingly, authoritarian dispositions provide a functional link to ideological conservatism (Federico and Tagar 2014), right-wing policy preferences (Hetherington and Suhay 2011; Johnston and Wronski 2015), and traditionalism (Federico, Fisher, and Deason 2011).

Yet the construct of authoritarianism also contains group-centric components, which motivate authoritarians to structure their group in ways that “enhance sameness and minimize diversity of people, beliefs, and behaviors” (Stenner 2005, 16). From this perspective, authoritarians aim to protect the group’s cohesion from members and leaders who do not comply with the group’s values and norms. Importantly, this component of authoritarianism is grounded in the desire to be part of a group, not in the identification with a particular social or political group (Duckitt 1989; Stellmacher and Petzel 2005). Taking these conceptualizations together, authoritarians should be more committed to their political party (per Luttig 2017) and support leaders who are more conventional or prototypical of the group (Hogg 2001).

The 2016 Democratic primary election provides an excellent context of intraparty competition within which to examine the effects of authoritarianism on vote choice. On one hand, Clinton was a traditional candidate, being relatively hawkish and religious and a group exemplar with a decades-long career in the party. On the other hand, Sanders was a nontraditional party outsider who adopted the Democratic label more recently and distinguished himself as a “democratic socialist.” Authoritarianism could, therefore, shape Democratic primary vote choice on the basis of its association with traditionalism (Federico et al. 2011; Hetherington and Weiler 2009) and its latent motive to preserve group uniformity and support more prototypical group leaders (Hogg 2001; Stellmacher and Petzel 2005; Stenner 2005). We thus predict an authoritarian divide among Democrats in the 2016 primary elections, with high authoritarians gravitating toward Clinton and low authoritarians toward Sanders.

### DATA AND METHOD

To test the effects of authoritarianism among Democrats, we used data from two nationally diverse sources: the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) University of Mississippi module (Dowling 2016) and a YouGov

study fielded in fall 2017 ( $N = 1,000$  each; see table A1; tables A1–A8 are available online). We also used a non-probability sample of undergraduates from five southern universities, composed predominantly of first-time voters ( $N = 955$ ; see table A1). The student sample provides a test of our hypothesis among individuals whose political ideology and partisan loyalties are still malleable (Campbell et al. 1960), while their dispositional traits, like authoritarianism, are relatively stable and exogenous to political socialization (McCourt et al. 1999). Thus, although the student sample is nonrepresentative, it allows us to examine to what extent authoritarianism among young Democrats is already a predictive force of their voting behavior and how its effect compares to their developing political preferences such as partisanship and ideology. Since we are primarily interested in divisions within the Democratic Party, our full models only include Democrats who voted for either Clinton or Sanders in the 2016 primary (CCES  $N = 295$ , YouGov  $N = 217$ , and student sample  $N = 163$ ).<sup>1</sup>

All data sets contained the child-rearing measure of authoritarianism (Feldman 2003), coded 0–1, with higher values reflecting greater authoritarianism. This scale relates directly to the aggression and submission components of authoritarianism (see Feldman and Stenner 1997; Stenner 2005) and is highly correlated with conventionalism and Altemeyer’s (1988) Right-Wing Authoritarianism scale (see Feldman 2003). Of particular relevance, this child-rearing scale is the standard measure of authoritarianism used in contemporary American politics research (see Hetherington and Weiler 2009) and in examining vote choice in the 2016 election (MacWilliams 2016). Although some scholars argue that this scale assesses authoritarianism differentially across race (Pérez and Hetherington 2014), our analyses combine whites and nonwhites in order to properly reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of Democratic voters (although our key results generally hold when examining whites and nonwhites separately despite reduced sample size; see fig. A4, tables A7a and A7b; figs. A1–A5 are available online).

The distribution of authoritarianism in our primary national data set, the CCES (see fig. 1A), confirms that Republicans ( $N = 341$ ,  $M = 0.62$ ) are significantly more authoritarian than Democrats ( $N = 461$ ,  $M = 0.48$ ,  $t = -6.4$ ,  $p < .001$  in an independent  $t$ -test with unequal variances). Concurrently, however, the variation in authoritarianism is significantly higher among Democrats than Republicans (standard deviations of 0.35 and 0.30, respectively;  $F = 1.39$ ,

1. Democratic primary voters not voting for Clinton or Sanders either voted for a Republican (student sample  $N = 10$ , CCES  $N = 18$ ) or did not recall whom they voted for (YouGov  $N = 6$ ).

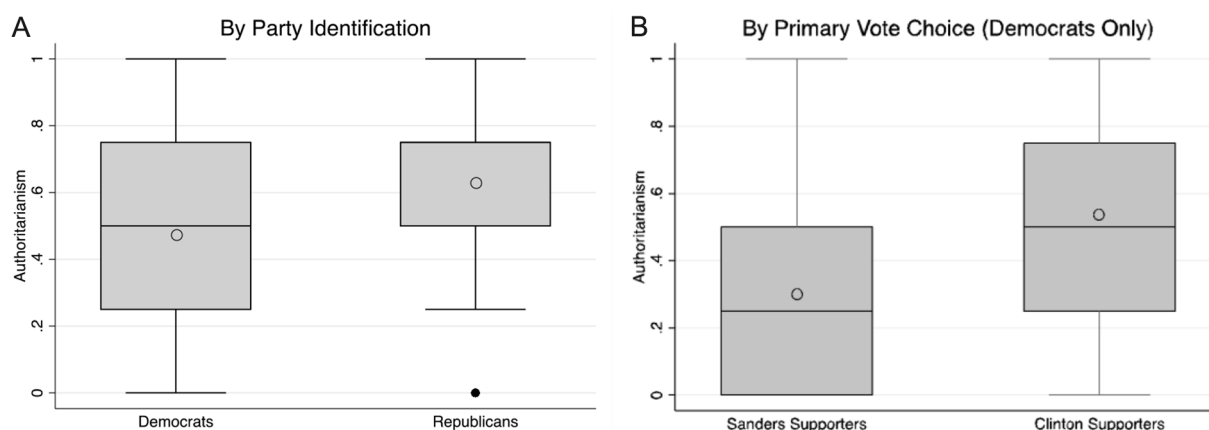


Figure 1. Distributions of authoritarianism (Cooperative Congressional Election Study). Authoritarianism is scaled from 0 (min) to 1 (max). Open circles indicate mean values for each group.

$p < .0012$ , in a standard variance comparison test). Notably, the difference between Clinton and Sanders supporters ( $N = 187$ ,  $M = 0.52$ , and  $N = 108$ ,  $M = 0.29$ , respectively;  $t = 5.66$ ,  $p < .001$ ) is larger than the difference between Republicans and Democrats (0.23 vs. 0.14, respectively; see fig. 1B). We replicate this pattern of variation in our other national sample (YouGov), while the student sample reveals equal variances in authoritarianism across parties (figs. A1a–A2b). There is no similar divide among Republicans between Trump and Cruz primary voters in any of our samples (figs. A3a–A3c). Thus, the intraparty distribution of authoritarianism is largely unique to the Democratic Party.

Our dependent variable is the dichotomous primary vote choice between Sanders (0) and Clinton (1). We control for self-reported ideology and partisan strength in order to examine the effects of authoritarianism independent of these relevant factors. In the YouGov study, we account for the possibility that alternative individual difference variables, including social dominance orientation (SDO), need for cognitive closure, and racial resentment, could shape vote choice. Finally, in all three samples, we include controls for education, church attendance, gender, and race, while the CCES and the YouGov sample add controls for income, union membership, southern residence, and marital status.<sup>2</sup>

### PREDICTING 2016 DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY VOTE CHOICE

We first logistically regress vote choice for Clinton versus Sanders on authoritarianism and our aforementioned control variables (fig. 2, table A3; see also tables A4–A6 for

robustness checks).<sup>3</sup> In line with our expectations, authoritarianism is a significant and positive predictor of voting for Clinton over Sanders in all samples. In the CCES and YouGov samples, partisan strength is also a positive predictor of voting for Clinton. However, it was not a significant determinant in the undergraduate sample, demonstrating the primacy of authoritarian dispositions in shaping young people's political preferences. Similarly, ideology is only a significant predictor of voting for Clinton over Sanders in the YouGov sample, indicating that authoritarianism operates above and beyond ideological identification and partisan strength. Finally, we find that authoritarianism is the only significant predispositional measure, suggesting that this candidate matchup specifically resonates with Democrats' authoritarian dispositions.

The predicted probabilities displayed in figure 3 clearly illustrate the effects of authoritarianism on Democratic vote choice in all three data sets. As a Democrat in the CCES sample moves from the minimum value on the authoritarianism scale to the maximum value, the probability of voting for Clinton increases from 0.33 to 0.76 while holding other influential factors constant. Similarly, the probability of voting for Clinton rises from 0.36 to 0.71 across the range of authoritarianism in the YouGov sample, closely mirroring the results from the CCES. Among students, the effect is even larger—the probability of voting for Clinton increases dramatically from 0.18 to 0.87 as young Democrats shift from the lower end of authoritarianism to its maximum value.

These results provide evidence for an authoritarian divide among Democrats that played a crucial role in the

2. These variables are dropped in the student models given their lack of variation. See table A2 for all variable descriptions.

3. Addition of the controls reduces the CCES sample to  $N = 260$ , the YouGov sample to  $N = 195$ , and the student sample to  $N = 101$  in the presented models.

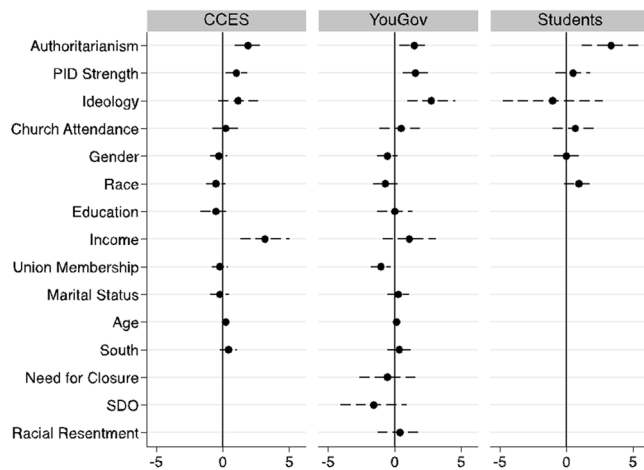


Figure 2. Coefficients from logistic regression models of voting for Clinton over Sanders. Data are taken from the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, 2017 YouGov, and the 2016 student sample. To facilitate comparisons, all variables are scaled to range from 0 to 1, except for age, which is measured in decades (see table A2 for variable details).

2016 primary. Importantly, these effects are driven by respondents at both the low and high ends of authoritarianism. Surprisingly, we do not find any significant effect of authoritarianism among Republicans' primary vote choice in all three samples (see fig. A5, table A8), which underlines the uniquely divisive nature of authoritarianism among Democrats. Moreover, as we have shown by replicating our results with a student sample, this authoritarian divide is already discernible among young Democrats whose party loyalties and ideological preferences are not yet solidified. This emphasizes the importance of authoritarianism, even among first-time voters.

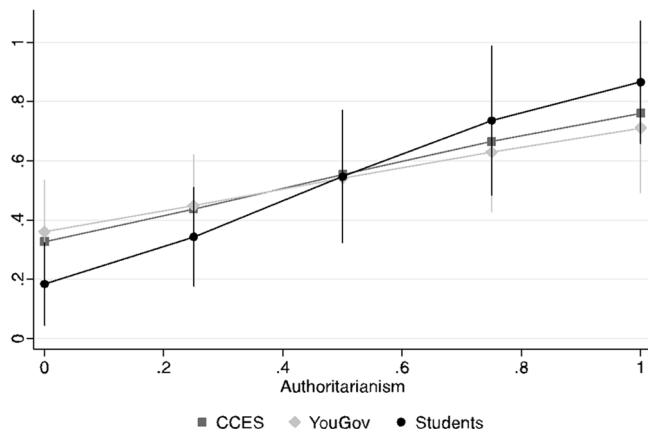


Figure 3. Predicted probabilities of voting for Clinton over Sanders based on logistic regression results are calculated holding all variables at their mean or modal categories (see table A1).

**CONCLUSION**

We have demonstrated that authoritarianism (1) exists within the Democratic Party, where variation on this disposition abounds; (2) imparts differential effects on vote choice, highlighting intraparty conflicts; and (3) predicts political preferences, even among youth, for whom partisan strength and ideology are less stable factors. In 2016, Clinton was the more traditional candidate, with a long history as a brand name party figure who had taken on various leadership roles—characteristics that should appeal to authoritarian Democrats. In contrast, Sanders was an Independent turned Democrat, who promoted an aggressively liberal agenda with an unambiguous disdain for the party establishment, all of which authoritarians should eschew. While we discuss traditionalism and group-centric aspects of authoritarianism, the causal mechanism by which this trait affected Democrats' vote choice remains unclear in the current data. Future research should assess how these aspects of authoritarianism shape electoral behavior among voters in both parties.

Where do Democrats go from here? Our results suggest that the party should be cognizant of the potentially conflicting leadership preferences of its base. Indeed, within months of Trump's victory, the election for the Democratic National Committee chair again divided the party into Sanders and Clinton factions. The newly formed Justice Democrats Political Action Committee has called for the ousting of establishment incumbents and has endorsed dozens of Sanders-style candidates for the 2018 primaries. All of these events are indicative of intraparty battles that could continue dividing Democrats along the authoritarian dimension. Such disputes over the party's brand have the potential to weaken party attachments and political engagement among Democrats (Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015). Notably, such divisions were not found in Republican primary voting patterns, highlighting an important partisan asymmetry (per Federico, Deason, and Fisher 2012). We hope that our findings motivate further research on authoritarianism among Democrats and on how this disposition affects the party's future leadership.

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