

¹EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Authoritarian Orientation and Political Participation Revisited:

The 2016 U.S. Presidential Primaries

Political participation of citizens is a central virtue of democratic societies, as participation is believed to convey the will of citizens and protect them from the manipulation people in power (Verba, Scholzman, & Brady 1995). In contrast, in authoritarian regimes, authoritarian values and need for social and political ‘order’ foster strong desire for leadership and discourage popular participation (Peterson, Smirles, & Wentworth, 1997).

Hetherington & Weiler (2009) make an intriguing contention that the current political polarization in the U.S. can in part be explained by groups with different levels of authoritarianism holding increasingly different worldviews. In light of their argument, as widening partisan divide drives antagonistic groups to act, the traditional notion that authoritarianism impedes political activism may need to be revisited. We argue that in scenarios of high-stake political competition, like the recent presidential election, perceived ideological threat (Feldman & Stenner, 1997) would motivate more vibrant activism by individuals with strong authoritarian values. In other words, an authoritarian orientation would be associated with higher rather than lower levels of political participation.

Communications have rarely been considered in research examining the impact of authoritarian values on political behaviors. We speculate that various kinds of communication activities, including information seeking, expressing opinion online, or engaging in political discussion with like-minded or different others, would have contingent effects on how

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authoritarian orientation drives participatory behaviors. In particular, we are interested in the conditional effect of heterogeneous political talk on this relationship.

To test these relationships, we conducted a nationally representative survey to examine the relationship between a dimension of authoritarianism, i.e. the tendency of deference to established authorities (Altemeyer, 1996) and patterns of political participation (both online and offline) among American voters during the 2016 presidential primaries period. According to our rationales, we pose the following hypotheses:

H1: High level of authoritarianism will be positively associated with participation.

H2: *Mediation hypothesis:* Communication activities, such as information seeking, online expression, etc. will mediate the effect of authoritarianism on participation.

H3: *Moderation hypothesis:* Exposure to heterogeneous political discussions will moderate the effect of authoritarianism on participation.

METHOD

Our data were collected from 2016 April 5-10, using online survey panels administered by Survey Sampling International (SSI) in the U.S. The dataset contained 514 complete responses which reflects well the U.S. adult population (age 18+) in terms of gender, age, educational level, and race. The survey asked respondents questions related to their use of different media for news and political information, frequency of political talks, participation activities both online and offline, political values, etc. among other things. The main independent variable of interest is “authoritarianism”, which was measured by the extent to which respondents agreed with the statement “We should be grateful to leaders who tell us exactly what to do and how to do it” (from 0: strongly disagree to 5: strongly agree, $M=1.68$; $SD=1.69$).

FINDINGS

1) Significant main effect of authoritarian orientation on political participation:

For online participation activities, hierarchical regression results showed that authoritarian orientation increases the frequency of all types of online participation, including signing up to volunteer for a social or political campaign ($\beta=.168$, $p<.001$), support political protests ($\beta=.136$, $p<.001$), mobilize contacts around social or political causes ($\beta=.177$, $p<.001$), and make petitions or suggestions to candidates or government officials ($\beta=.170$, $p<.001$). This effect holds even after controlling for established predictors of participation, including demographics, political interest, efficacy, partisanship, and institutional trust.

For offline participation, logistic regression results showed that authoritarian orientation increases the likelihood of engaging in group-type participation, including attending political rally/protest, and working for movement or political party.

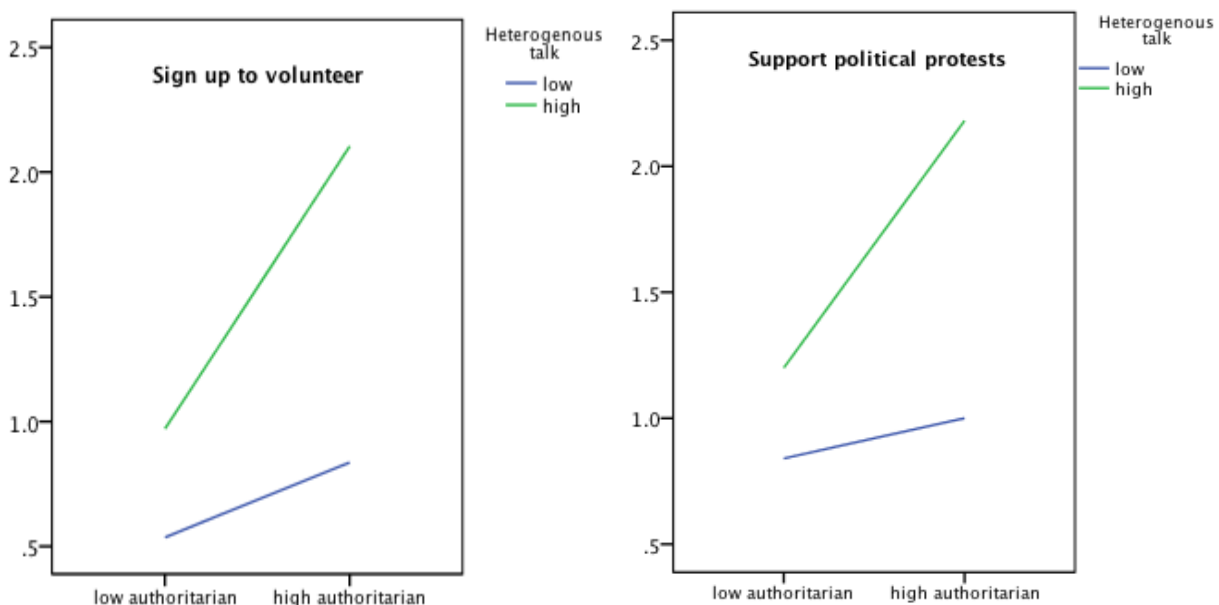
2) Online opinion expression mediates the effect of authoritarian orientation on both online and offline participation. Online information seeking only mediates the effect on some forms of online participation.

For online participation, mediation analysis showed that online expression mediates the relationship between authoritarian orientation and all forms of participation, including signing up to volunteer ($\beta=.11$, $\text{bootSE}=.03$, $\text{bootLLCI-ULCI} .06-.18$), supporting political protests ($\beta=.04$, $\text{bootSE}=.01$, $\text{bootLLCI-ULCI} .02-.06$), mobilizing contacts ($\beta=.03$, $\text{bootSE}=.021$, $\text{bootLLCI-ULCI} .002-.08$), and making petitions ($\beta=.035$, $\text{bootSE}=.019$, $\text{bootLLCI-ULCI} .006-.078$). However, online information seeking only mediates the effect on signing up to volunteer ($\beta=.035$, $\text{bootSE}=.022$, $\text{bootLLCI-ULCI} .003-.06$), and making petitions ($\beta=.033$, $\text{bootSE}=.02$, $\text{bootLLCI-ULCI} .002-.083$).

We found similar patterns that online expression mediates the relationship between authoritarian orientation and most forms of offline participations (i.e. attend rally, sign up petition, work for party/movement, donation, attend protest, and boycott).

3) The effect of authoritarian orientation on online participation is conditioned by exposure to heterogeneous political discussion.

There is a significant interaction between heterogeneous talk and strong leadership appreciation on participating online. Heterogeneous talk is particularly important among those who are highly supportive of strong leadership, with high levels of heterogeneous talk amplifying the frequency to support political protests ($\beta=.05$, $p<.01$) and sign up for volunteer online ($\beta=.08$, $p<.01$) (see Figure below).



IMPLICATIONS

Our findings contribute to the current literature in two ways. First, we show that communication activities are integral in understanding the relationship between authoritarianism and participation. Diana Mutz's works (2006) found that for the mass public, political

disagreement generated through talking with different others simultaneously promotes tolerance and suppresses participation. In a different vein, our results suggest that heterogeneous talks foster participation among people who appreciate strong leadership. Second, we find evidence supporting our argument that the desire for strong leadership does not necessarily inhibit participation. These findings suggest that in the 2016 presidential election, individuals with strong authoritarian values might have engaged in participatory behaviors they deemed to be conducive to the promotion of new strong leadership, perhaps because they were not satisfied with the status quo.

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