

# The Role of Education in Taming Authoritarian Attitudes

WITH A FOREWORD BY  
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2020

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY



Center  
on Education  
and the Workforce

McCourt School of Public Policy



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## Foreword

The classic tension between free will and determinism can be found in the contemporary college or university within disciplines ranging from sociology to neuroscience to political science. The enduring and challenging questions faculty, researchers, and students all wrestle with include: How much freedom do we really have? Do we decide and act with an understanding that we are responsible for the implications—the impact—of our choices? Or do we think these choices are the effects of external—or even innate—forces?

In this new report by Anthony P. Carnevale and colleagues from Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, we confront another framing of this tension: how can institutions of higher learning respond to the threats of rising authoritarianism? The report prompts us to ask how the work of our colleges and universities can respond to such threats—particularly if, as the report's authors assert, we all have “a predisposition toward authoritarianism that varies in relative strength according to the person.”

One way of examining these themes is to consider what universities are for. These institutions are composed of three elements that are inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing: supporting the **formation** of our students; providing a context and support for the **inquiry** of our faculty—the research and scholarship of epistemic communities; and contributing to the **common good** of the broader

communities in which we participate. We can consider higher education's role in each of these areas in light of rising authoritarianism as explained in this report.

### Formation

Colleges and universities support the formation of young people in multiple dimensions. Most of this development has already taken place in various settings and contexts before students ever arrive on our campuses. Young people emerge out of families, faith communities, primary and secondary schools, youth sports, and artistic experiences, such as drama and music; they are immersed in popular culture; they are connected to each other through social media. They have grown up with an array of cultural norms and assumptions. These settings and contexts all contribute to their personal development. And yet, our colleges and universities play a distinctive role in continuing and contributing to this formation process, one that is shaped by the centrality of knowledge.

Colleges and universities are dedicated to the acquisition and dissemination, the discovery and construction, the interpretation and conservation of knowledge. Together, these knowledge-developing activities determine the orientation of the university. In short, knowledge is what we are for; it is our work; it is what we contribute to the students who weave in and out of our orbit, and to the larger environments in which we're situated. And our role in students'

formation across all dimensions occurs at a particular time in their development, as part of an arc that begins at birth and continues throughout their lives.

Underpinning the work of formation is the conviction that we each can develop our own sense of authenticity through a rigorous process of self-interrogation and that we all will gradually become aware of conditions—within ourselves and external to ourselves—that enable us to do such self-authenticating work. Even in the face of a “predisposition toward authoritarianism,” the discipline of formation presumes that a capacity for developing an interior freedom can override authoritarian thinking. Colleges and universities can help make that so.

## Inquiry

The knowledge pursuits that provide the resources for formation are built on the foundation of the second element—inquiry. Because inquiry is essentially characterized by uncertainty, it involves many retracings and repeated experiments and makes great demands on those who pursue it. Colleges and universities provide an environment that sustains and protects all those engaged in these uncertain endeavors.

The deepest conviction in the practice of inquiry is that it is possible to break through the blocks and obstacles to the discovery and construction of knowledge—that we have the capacity to discover truth, and to challenge it continually—under conditions of freedom that enable an inquirer to follow the journey wherever it may lead. Stefan Collini describes this conviction as the “ungovernable play of the inquiring mind.”<sup>1</sup>

## The Common Good

Colleges and universities contribute to the common good of the communities in which they are situated, and to the larger arenas in which they are active. Their specific contributions may vary based on their missions: for example, a public land-grant university may contribute to economic development in its region or state through a strong commitment to agricultural research, while an urban university may have a focus on educating first-generation college students. Overall, the core conviction that shapes this third element of the university, however, is the emphasis on the importance of the public good. As pluralistic communities dedicated to the well-being of the broader communities in which they reside, colleges and universities embody and encourage diverse perspectives, enabling them to challenge both predispositions to and manifestations of authoritarianism.

The crucial insight of this new report is the role, first and foremost, of higher education as a bulwark against the threat of authoritarianism. Each element intrinsic to the university—formation, inquiry, and the common good—contributes to this solidity. This report is a clarion call for all in the academy to accept responsibility for performing a role that only we can play in our society. We are all indebted to Anthony P. Carnevale and his colleagues for this invaluable contribution to our civic discourse, and for challenging us to sustain the conditions of democracy that enable the promise of the American project.

—John J. DeGioia,  
President, Georgetown University

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<sup>1</sup> Collini, *What Are Universities For?*, 2012.





# Introduction

Imagine a scenario: In the midst of a global depression, national unemployment reaches extraordinary levels. The government implements a severe austerity plan that reduces spending on social programs while increasing taxes. Seeking a scapegoat for the public's pain, political leaders exploit longstanding cultural resentments toward minority groups and fuel new fears of globalization by appealing to nationalist sentiments. Using persuasion and intimidation, an authoritarian party that initially seized power in part through political appointment gains affirmation from a plurality of voters through the democratic electoral system.

This scenario is one interpretation of how the Nazi Party rose to power in Germany in the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> The transition from the Weimar Republic to the Third Reich is only one of many examples of democracy thrown off course, from ancient Greece and Rome to modern Russia.<sup>2</sup> As many scholars and commentators have argued, what happened in Germany could happen

again in any of the world's democracies—including in the United States. As past and present make abundantly clear, democracy is always under threat.<sup>3</sup>

Crucially, compared to the dangers from without, the perils that democracy faces from within can be even more insidious. This is particularly true of the dangers

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1 See Galofré-Vilà et al., "Austerity and the Rise of the Nazi Party," 2019; Brustein and King, "Anti-Semitism in Europe before the Holocaust," 2004; Snyder, "How Did the Nazis Gain Power in Germany?," 2018; and Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 2003.  
2 National Geographic, "Democracy (Ancient Greece)," n.d.; Lee, "40 Maps that Explain the Roman Empire," 2014; Kolonitskii, "'Democracy' in the Political Consciousness of the February Revolution," 1998; and Grodsky, "Russia, Putin Lead the Way in Exploiting Democracy's Lost Promise," 2018.  
3 We use "democracy" to refer to what political scientists more commonly call "liberal democracy," which emphasizes the importance of individual freedoms and civil liberties for all citizens, along with free elections and the rule of law.

of authoritarianism. While most people assume that authoritarianism is just a system of leadership, it actually has much broader roots in human psychology: authoritarianism is a “worldview” that leads individuals to prefer “authority and uniformity” over “autonomy and diversity.”<sup>4</sup> It exists in all societies, whether above or beneath the surface. In some cases, even in democratic societies, authoritarianism takes on legitimate social forms in defense of democracy: for example, the military is a system predicated on authoritarianism. In the military, the very survival of the group can depend on the group’s ability to function uniformly and closely follow the chain of command.

## DEMOCRACIES VALUE AND PROTECT DIVERSITY, FREEDOM OF THOUGHT, AND FREE EXPRESSION

While authoritarianism can coexist with democracy and even plays a practical role in some contexts, widespread authoritarianism presents thorny problems for democracies. At their best, democracies value and protect diversity, freedom of thought and expression, and the willingness to question authority and hold it accountable. In contrast, authoritarian political systems seek to limit diversity and freedom and may rely on political, cultural, social, and legal coercion to enforce group uniformity and ostracize outsiders.<sup>5</sup>

Fortunately, there are factors that counteract the influence of authoritarianism. Our research on authoritarianism in the United States suggests that education, particularly at the postsecondary level, can play a protective role. Certainly, some individuals without a formal education can stand as firmly against authoritarianism as those with the highest

levels of educational attainment. At the same time, however, higher levels of educational attainment appear to mitigate the tendency toward authoritarian preferences and attitudes.

The evidence that postsecondary education mitigates authoritarianism is strong: compared to those with no more than a high school diploma, bachelor’s degree holders were significantly less inclined, and associate’s degree holders were somewhat less inclined, to express authoritarian preferences and attitudes. On the whole, higher levels of education are associated with stronger democracies—a country with an educated populace is more likely to become or remain a democracy.<sup>6</sup>

Higher education possesses certain qualities that make it a natural bulwark against authoritarian tendencies. The habits that higher education aims to promote—including independent thought, respect for diversity, and inquisitive assessment of evidence—are antithetical to the unquestioning acceptance of authority that is characteristic of authoritarianism. These habits directly contrast with indoctrination, which discourages any independent thought that might differ from the views of the establishment. Higher education also exposes individuals to diverse people, cultures, and ideas and encourages empathy and tolerance, in particular through study of the liberal arts.

This report examines the relationship between authoritarianism and postsecondary education, including liberal arts education. This analysis rests on the idea that authoritarianism is part of human nature, but its influence waxes and wanes according to circumstances. When people feel themselves to be under threat, they are more likely to express authoritarian inclinations, including through intolerance of others who are unlike them.<sup>7</sup> Feelings of vulnerability may cause people to seek out the protection of authoritarian leaders and political systems. When they fear for their safety, even those whose worldviews are not particularly authoritarian

4 Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic*, 2005.

5 Stenner, “Three Kinds of ‘Conservatism,’” 2009.

6 Glaeser et al., “Why Does Democracy Need Education?,” 2007.

7 Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic*, 2005.

may be more willing to accept constraints on their civil liberties, as was the case in the United States after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.<sup>8</sup>

Having entered a new era defined by the COVID-19 pandemic, the evidence suggests that there is good reason to worry about the future of democracy. Presenting enormous threats to physical and economic well-being worldwide, this contemporary emergency bears the hallmarks of a possible tipping point into authoritarianism. The crisis and its fallout are occurring at a time when authoritarian populism was arguably already on the rise around the globe,<sup>9</sup> and early reports indicated that some authoritarian governments began restricting civil liberties even further as the pandemic spread.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the threat, a slide into authoritarianism is not inevitable. Postsecondary education can play a protective role for democracy.

## KEY FINDINGS



College graduates are less inclined to express authoritarian preferences and attitudes than their peers with less education.



Liberal arts majors in particular are less inclined to express authoritarian preferences and attitudes than majors in business-related fields and STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics).



Higher education provides people with a greater sense of security. As a result, it can lead to the development of interpersonal trust, which is associated with a weaker inclination toward expressing authoritarian preferences and attitudes.



People with postsecondary education are more economically secure than those without it, and people who are economically secure are less inclined to express authoritarian preferences and attitudes.



People with postsecondary education are more likely to be politically active, which in the United States is associated with a lower inclination toward expressing authoritarian preferences and attitudes.



Postsecondary education tends to expose people to secular values and cultures, leading them to be less inclined to express authoritarian preferences and attitudes.

8 Hetherington and Suhay, "Authoritarianism, Threat, and Americans' Support for the War on Terror," 2011.

9 Norris, "It's Not Just Trump," 2016.

10 Maza, "Authoritarian Leaders Are Using the Coronavirus Pandemic as an Excuse to Lock Up Dissenters and Grab Power," 2020.



## PART 1.

# Authoritarianism and Democracy

Not long ago, democracy appeared to be on a steady upward trajectory. By the end of the 20th century, nearly 90 countries, home to 56 percent of the world's population, had adopted democratic forms of government, compared to 52 countries, covering 41 percent of the world's population, at the end of the Cold War in 1989.<sup>11</sup> Seeing these trends at the beginning of the 21st century, it wasn't hard to imagine that democracy might become the global norm.

But democracy's expected triumph has not come to pass. What's more, recent developments have underscored the dangers of complacency about democracy's future as authoritarianism has seen a global resurgence. Authoritarian leadership has recently taken hold in Brazil, the Philippines, Turkey, and Hungary, to name only a few examples, while longstanding authoritarian regimes in countries like China, Myanmar, and North Korea maintain unwavering control. China is pioneering a new form of draconian regulation by assigning each person

a "social credit score" based on behavior tracked through big data and electronic surveillance.<sup>12</sup> Russia has been described as masking authoritarianism with what some have called "fake democracy."<sup>13</sup>

In addition, recent trends in the United States and Western Europe indicate that authoritarianism's reach may be both broad and deep, affecting even the most established democratic nations. Some established democracies have adopted social controls often associated with authoritarian regimes (such as high

<sup>11</sup> Roser, "Democracy," 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Marr, "Chinese Social Credit Score," 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Partlett, "Can Russia Keep Faking Democracy?," 2012.

levels of surveillance as a check against terrorism),<sup>14</sup> while support for authoritarian-leaning leaders has risen at the ballot box.<sup>15</sup>

Seeking to explain the rise of authoritarian political systems, observers have linked the trend to discomfort with pluralism in its many forms. In many Western countries, cultural change associated with racial and ethnic diversity in general and immigration in particular has combined with growing economic insecurity to increase support for authoritarian populism.<sup>16</sup> Pluralism is not in and of itself a threat to economic growth: diversity has been shown to have strong economic value, particularly in organizations that capitalize on its strengths.<sup>17</sup> But it is a threat to social cohesion, particularly among those who prefer social conformity.<sup>18</sup> In addition, groups that hold social and economic power are rarely eager to relinquish control in favor of more equitable distributions. As various countries have grappled with the implications of changing demographics and related cultural shifts, segments of their populations have responded negatively to rising racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity, seeing it as a threat to their way of life.

Authoritarian leaders have made use of this perceived threat, consolidating power by appealing to some people's preference for oneness and sameness. These leaders have capitalized on threats to people's sense of group identity, their physical safety, their economic security, and their social norms to justify hierarchical leadership approaches that, while useful in some contexts (for example, to sustain order in military combat), are ultimately contrary to the values of a democratic republic, such as respect for individual rights and liberties.<sup>19</sup> Even societies like the United States that have endeavored to balance the tensions between social cohesion and personal autonomy are not impervious to the effects of these threats.

Among established democracies, the United States has long distinguished itself for its commitment to two sometimes contradictory tenets—liberty and justice—alongside a belief that all people have a right to pursue happiness, including by seeking economic prosperity. Throughout our country's history, these three values have been intertwined, although we have sometimes failed miserably to live up to them. Our nation's economic prosperity rests on a foundation not only of free markets, but also of confidence in the legal system that ensures their fairness.<sup>20</sup>

Some countries have been trying to replicate American prosperity without the burdensome messiness of liberty and justice, while others think that the United States itself will be best positioned to compete economically by limiting these guarantees that we have long held dear. Modern authoritarianism, traditionally associated with fascist and communist governments, is now achieving economic success by embracing some aspects of capitalism, eroding the long-accepted relationship between democratic governance and economic prosperity.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, capitalist democracies have grown tolerant of doing business with authoritarian governments they once would have shunned—as seen, for example, when the World Trade Organization admitted China as a member despite its use of authoritarian governance to perpetuate human rights abuses.

Today's authoritarianism is particularly insidious because it has a veneer of democracy. Some modern autocrats appeal to voters who freely elect them, and then amass power from within democratic institutions. While in the past some dictators relied heavily on physical violence to assert dominance, modern autocracies have favored information control as a primary strategy. Instead of threatening physical coercion, they preserve the appearance of democracy even as they suppress the rights of

14 The United Kingdom is a key example of a Western democracy that has adopted high levels of surveillance; see Satariano, "Real-Time Surveillance Will Test the British Tolerance for Cameras," 2019.

15 Norris, "It's Not Just Trump," 2016.

16 Inglehart and Norris, "Trump and the Populist Authoritarian Parties," 2017.

17 Carnevale and Smith, "The Economic Value of Diversity," 2016.

18 Feldman, "Enforcing Social Conformity," 2003.

19 Hetherington and Suhay discuss the tensions between individual rights and aspects of authoritarianism in "Authoritarianism, Threat, and Americans' Support for the War on Terror," 2011.

20 May, "Market Exchange and the Rule of Law," 2018.

21 Foa, "Modernization and Authoritarianism," 2018.

underrepresented groups and the press. They maintain power by exploiting knowledge gaps and controlling information,<sup>22</sup> and by promising certain groups advantages over others in exchange for relaxed civil liberties.<sup>23</sup> In general, they enjoy much higher levels of popular support than traditional autocrats.<sup>24</sup>

That popular support is what makes authoritarianism so dangerous: it exists out in the open, challenging democratic norms and principles, but cloaks itself in those very norms. It points to the will of the people for support even as it subverts the people's power to challenge it. It skillfully manipulates information technology, promoting misinformation by taking advantage of a saturated media landscape to claim its competence even in the face of compelling evidence to the contrary.<sup>25</sup> It spreads its influence abroad through new modes of instantaneous global information exchange, as when Russia used social media fraud and hacking to influence voters during

the 2016 election in the United States.<sup>26</sup> Spreading false information is nothing new, of course—propaganda has existed throughout modern history. But today's information technology enables false or misleading ideas to spread nearly instantaneously through social networks and other media that confirm people's existing biases. With modern media sources proliferating and the lines between traditional and alternative sources blurred, it is more difficult than ever to separate fact from fiction.

Given recent trends in authoritarian leadership and how new information technology enables authoritarianism to spread, it stands to reason that citizens of the world's liberal democracies should be worried about what comes next. Authoritarianism is a direct threat to democracy.<sup>27</sup> It breeds intolerance of diversity, promotes ultranationalism, and threatens the very existence of those who don't or can't conform to societal norms. And yet, as surges in populist support



## How do we measure authoritarian tendencies in individuals?

To measure the authoritarian predisposition, many researchers turn to child-rearing values, arguing that the traits adults would like to see in children reflect those adults' "fundamental orientations" toward the balance between autonomy and social control.<sup>i</sup> Would an adult prefer that children be obedient and well-mannered, for example, or imaginative and independent? The answers to questions like these can give researchers a sense of a person's value system, and, in turn, that individual's receptiveness to authoritarian leadership.<sup>ii</sup>

Researchers have also evaluated support for authoritarian political regimes based on expressed opinions on three items: support for a strong leader, support for military rule, and lack of support for democracy.<sup>iii</sup> A person's stated preferences related to these items can signal support for an authoritarian style of governance.

For more about how we measure authoritarianism, see Appendix A.

<sup>i</sup> Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic*, 2005, 24.

<sup>ii</sup> Stenner, "Three Kinds of 'Conservatism,'" 2009.

<sup>iii</sup> Miller and Davis, "The Effect of White Social Prejudice on Support for American Democracy," 2020.

22 Guriev and Treisman, "Informational Autocrats," 2018.

23 Glaeser and colleagues propose that dictatorships offer strong incentives (punishments or rewards) to small groups of people to secure support for a regime, while democracies offer weaker incentives to a broader base. See Glaeser et al., "Why Does Democracy Need Education?," 2007.

24 Guriev and Treisman, "Informational Autocrats," 2018.

25 Guriev and Treisman, "Informational Autocrats," 2018.

26 Yourish et al., "A Timeline Showing the Full Scale of Russia's Unprecedented Interference in the 2016 Election, and Its Aftermath," 2018.

27 Miller and Davis, "The Effect of White Social Prejudice on Support for American Democracy," 2020.

for authoritarian leaders around the globe have illustrated, it still holds broad appeal to large sections of the populace. To best determine how to counter the threat of authoritarianism, we need to understand why it appeals to so many people.

### Popular support for authoritarian leadership is rooted in human psychology.

In political terms, authoritarian leadership can take many forms: dictatorship, autocracy, oligarchy, totalitarianism, fascism, and theocracy can all be authoritarian modes of governance. But authoritarianism can also refer to the psychological and sociological phenomena that lead people to prefer strong hierarchical leadership. For some people, these preferences may originate in childhood exposure to stern parenting styles that instill deference to authority.<sup>28</sup> The psychological dynamics of authoritarianism and their relationship to higher education are our primary concerns in this report.

After fascism took hold in Europe in the early 20th century, researchers hoped to understand the factors that allowed authoritarian figures to gain standing in democratic societies. They wanted to know, for example, what allowed the Nazi Party to claim power in, and then dissolve, the Weimar Republic. Most famously, Theodor Adorno and colleagues explored the relationship between authoritarianism, ethnocentrism, and fascism in *The Authoritarian Personality*, published in 1950.<sup>29</sup> Their work attempted to clarify how certain personalities might be prone to accept and promote authoritarian leadership.

Many frameworks for understanding authoritarianism developed from this starting point. Robert Altemeyer built on Adorno's work with his scale of Right-Wing Authoritarianism, which focused on three dimensions:

- **authoritarian aggression** (aggressiveness toward various outgroups),

- **authoritarian submission** (a willingness to submit to established authority), and
- **conventionalism** (a tendency toward social convention).<sup>30</sup>

John Duckitt and colleagues later updated Altemeyer's framework by reconceiving the three dimensions as

- **authoritarianism** (the tendency to favor punitive rather than permissive responses when norms or laws have been violated),
- **conservatism** (the tendency to favor respectful obedience over rebelliousness or questioning), and
- **traditionalism** (the tendency to favor established norms and values over new ones).<sup>31</sup>

Our research builds primarily on a long-established definition of authoritarianism furthered by political scientist Karen Stenner. Stenner has proposed that individuals have different levels of predisposition toward authoritarianism, and that this predisposition can be activated by the presence of threats to accepted norms.

Stenner defines authoritarianism as "an individual predisposition concerned with the appropriate balance between group authority and uniformity, on the one hand, and individual autonomy and diversity, on the other."<sup>32</sup> In Stenner's estimation, each individual has an authoritarian predisposition that falls somewhere between two extremes: a preference for group coherence and a desire for individual autonomy.

Critically, this predisposition affects a person's inclination toward tolerance or intolerance. In brief, those who prefer group authority and uniformity are, by their nature, more inclined to be intolerant of outsiders. This inclination is more than a preference: in fact, it amounts to a "normative 'worldview'" that governs how people respond to their circumstances.<sup>33</sup>

28 Dražanová, *Education and Tolerance*, 2017.

29 For a discussion of Adorno's influence, see Feldman, "Enforcing Social Conformity," 2003.

30 Stellmacher and Petzel, "Authoritarianism as a Group Phenomenon," 2005.

31 Duckitt and Bizumic, "Multidimensionality of Right-Wing Authoritarian Attitudes," 2013.

32 Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic*, 2005.

33 Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic*, 2005.



## AUTHORITARIANISM IS EXPRESSED THROUGH INTOLERANCE

Of course, worldview alone does not determine behavior. While an authoritarian worldview is relatively common,<sup>34</sup> individuals who hold this worldview are more likely to *express* intolerance of others in the presence of certain conditions.<sup>35</sup> That is, when individuals with a predisposition toward authoritarianism perceive themselves as being under threat, they may experience authoritarian activation. Some researchers have argued that when authoritarian activation occurs, it can be understood as a group-level phenomenon, depending in part on the strength of identification with a group identity.<sup>36</sup> These ideas about “activation” have been influential in popular and academic understandings of authoritarianism.<sup>37</sup>

Because authoritarianism is expressed through intolerance, we argue that intolerance is one of the challenges that authoritarianism presents to free societies. Just as authoritarianism can take many different forms, so too can expressions of intolerance and their inverse. For example, **political tolerance** involves support for the idea that the state should allow even those ideas that one finds disagreeable to be expressed. **Social tolerance**, on the other hand, involves tolerance of lifestyles or ways of being that are different from one’s own.<sup>38</sup> Political intolerance is expressed through limitations

on free speech or political expression, while social intolerance finds its expression in such attitudes as xenophobia, nativism, racism, ethnocentrism, and religious sectarianism.<sup>39</sup> In multicultural societies, people frequently find a way to narrowly define who belongs and who doesn’t through a process called “othering.” Othering occurs when conscious or unconscious biases lead members of one group to believe that another group or groups pose a threat to their norms. The process of othering can foment intolerance in its various forms.<sup>40</sup>

### A range of common circumstances are known to activate support for authoritarian leadership.

Stenner’s activation theory raises a key question: what circumstances tend to activate authoritarian tendencies? What would prompt an individual or a group to support the constraints on civil liberties that authoritarian leadership typically imposes?

Researchers generally agree that the **perception of threat** plays a large role. Those who are predisposed toward authoritarianism may be more inclined to turn to authoritarian leadership for protection when they feel either physically or psychologically threatened.<sup>41</sup> In fact, some researchers have argued that authoritarianism may offer psychological protection to those who are predisposed toward experiencing high levels of stress or who live in stressful circumstances.<sup>42</sup> Consciously or subconsciously, these individuals may turn to authoritarian leaders for reassurance that someone has firm control over their lives.

34 Stenner and Haidt find that 33 percent of White respondents to a December 2016 survey of 28 European Union countries and the United States were predisposed to hold authoritarian worldviews; “Authoritarianism Is Not a Momentary Madness, but an Eternal Dynamic within Liberal Democracies,” 2018.

35 Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic*, 2005.

36 Stellmacher and Petzel, “Authoritarianism as a Group Phenomenon,” 2005.

37 See Taub, “The Rise of American Authoritarianism,” 2016.

38 Dražanová, *Education and Tolerance*, 2017.

39 For more on patterns of and problems with intolerance, see Powell and Menendian, “The Problem of Othering,” 2016; Strabac et al., “Patterns of Ethnic Intolerance in Europe,” 2012; and Koppelman, *Understanding Human Differences*, 2016.

40 Powell and Menendian, “The Problem of Othering,” 2016.

41 See, for example, Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic*, 2005; Feldman, “Enforcing Social Conformity,” 2003; and Stellmacher and Petzel, “Authoritarianism as a Group Phenomenon,” 2005.

42 Hetherington and Suhay cite evidence that “authoritarians experience unusually high levels of anxiety, insecurity, and stress” (see “Authoritarianism, Threat, and Americans’ Support for the War on Terror,” 2011); Brandt and Henry posit that women in societies with higher levels of gender inequality turn to authoritarianism as a form of “psychological protection” (see “Gender Inequality and Gender Differences in Authoritarianism,” 2012).





## Authoritarianism and Political Conservatism

Authoritarianism can bear some resemblance to political conservatism. Despite this overlap, it is important to distinguish between the two phenomena, as not all conservatives are predisposed to authoritarianism, just as not all authoritarians hold politically conservative viewpoints.

Authoritarianism and conservatism are two distinct ideological preferences. Authoritarianism primarily involves a preference for social cohesion and intolerance of differences in society. Conservatism, on the other hand, primarily involves a preference for the status quo and an opposition to social change (social conservatism) or government intervention in the economy (economic conservatism).<sup>i</sup> Because authoritarianism and conservatism have different psychological origins, they are affected differently by factors such as age: while conservatism appears to increase with age, the same is not necessarily true of authoritarianism.<sup>ii</sup>

Despite these differences, authoritarians tend to find more in common with politicians on the right, who often promote positions that maintain established norms and traditional social structures.<sup>iii</sup> As a result, authoritarianism has long been confounded with conservatism, even in research. For example, Altemeyer's Right Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) scale, an influential means of measuring authoritarian inclinations, initially intertwined the two subjects.<sup>iv</sup>

That said, researchers have sought to establish ways to describe and measure authoritarianism that avoid political bias. Some researchers have even argued that some types of conservatism—in particular, “laissez-faire conservatism” (or the opposition to state involvement) and “status quo conservatism” (or resistance to change)—can serve as valuable levers against authoritarianism.<sup>v</sup> When the status quo is one that values nonconformity over tradition, for example, a status-quo conservative would oppose the conformity that authoritarianism demands. And because authoritarianism usually involves strong government interference, a laissez-faire conservative might object to it on that account.<sup>vi</sup>

i For a more detailed discussion of the differences between authoritarianism and conservatism, see Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic*, 2005.

ii Stenner briefly discusses the relationship between conservatism and authoritarianism in “Three Kinds of ‘Conservatism,’” 2009. Our analysis produced mixed results regarding the relationship between age and authoritarianism; for more, see Appendix A.

iii Federico and Tagar, “Zeroing In on the Right,” 2014.

iv Feldman, “Enforcing Social Conformity,” 2003.

v Libertarianism is one example of a political stance that combines laissez-faire economic principles with an anti-authoritarian approach that protects individual autonomy.

vi Stenner, “Three Kinds of ‘Conservatism,’” 2009.

While the presence of a perceived threat may be a common trigger, the nature of the threat can vary widely:

- **Physical Safety**

Perceived threats to physical safety are a particularly effective trigger. Individuals sensing such threats may be willing to support actions that curtail civil liberties in the interest of responding to a pandemic or preventing crime or terrorism.<sup>43</sup> The associated intolerance might take the form of support for stop-and-frisk or security screening practices that disproportionately affect racial, ethnic, or religious minority groups.

- **Economic Security**

Perceived threats to economic security may affect those who are economically vulnerable or who perceive themselves as such. People who have less control over their work situations may see themselves as being in direct competition with outgroups for employment, and they may turn to authoritarian leadership for protection from those groups.<sup>44</sup> Support for strict regulation of immigration, including calls for narrower pathways to citizenship, is one possible policy that may strongly appeal to this group.

- **Group Identity**

Perceived threats to group identity can also play a role. When an individual with strong authoritarian tendencies identifies strongly with a group, and the identity of that group is threatened, intolerance can result. In fact, stronger identification with the threatened group increases the likelihood of an authoritarian response.<sup>45</sup> A sense of existential security is associated with greater tolerance, whereas people who feel that their group existence is threatened may become

more intolerant and more prone to authoritarian politics.<sup>46</sup> For example, White extremists and people who hold prejudiced views of other groups and feel threatened by growing demographic diversity in the United States may be less likely to have positive views of democratic institutions that provide equal rights, freedoms, and opportunities to other racial and ethnic groups.<sup>47</sup>

- **Social Norms**

Perceived threats to social norms are of concern to those with a strong sense of traditionalism. These individuals may react poorly to perceived threats to conformity—including forms of diversity, which by its nature can represent a refusal to conform.<sup>48</sup> When under threat, those inclined to value conformity over individuality may become intolerant of differences and turn to political groups that promise to enforce norms across society. Opposition to antidiscrimination laws protecting gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people may stem from this dynamic.

Importantly, as researchers have increasingly established, people whose beliefs span the political spectrum can display authoritarian tendencies.<sup>49</sup> And when a threat is particularly salient—as when Americans felt personally threatened in the wake of the 9/11 attacks—even those whose authoritarian tendencies are not particularly strong can demonstrate authoritarian behaviors.<sup>50</sup>

These dynamics can have serious consequences, as Miller and Davis argue in their work on racial intolerance in American democracy. Their research indicates that when people in the majority feel a threat to their existence—even a symbolic threat—they are more likely to support specific government

43 Hetherington and Suhay, "Authoritarianism, Threat, and Americans' Support for the War on Terror," 2011.

44 Stubager, "Education Effects on Authoritarian–Libertarian Values," 2008. In the international arena, researchers have found that perceived—but not actual—economic vulnerability corresponded with voting for Brexit; Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash*, 2019, 387. Economic distress caused by debt in the face of the global financial crisis has also been associated with increases in far-right populism in Hungary; Gyöngyösi and Verner, "Financial Crisis, Creditor-Debtor Conflict, and Political Extremism," 2018.

45 Stellmacher and Petzel, "Authoritarianism as a Group Phenomenon," 2005.

46 Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash*, 2019.

47 Miller and Davis, "The Effect of White Social Prejudice on Support for American Democracy," 2020. Baby boomers experiencing declining population shares and significant cultural change as millennials come of age are another example; see Norris and Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash*, 2019.

48 Feldman, "Enforcing Social Conformity," 2003.

49 For example, Stellmacher and Petzel specifically discuss the phenomenon of German progressives supporting Germany's role in the Kosovo war in "Authoritarianism as a Group Phenomenon," 2005.

50 Hetherington and Suhay, "Authoritarianism, Threat, and Americans' Support for the War on Terror," 2011.

actions. For example, White Americans who express a disinclination toward having neighbors who are of a different race, who are immigrants, or who speak a different language have a higher likelihood of supporting military or strongman rule, along with a higher likelihood of rejecting democracy and its protections of the rights of underrepresented groups.<sup>51</sup> Support for disproportionately strong police action against members of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups may be one example of how those authoritarian tendencies play out in practice.

### **Education can play a protective role for democratic institutions.**

If authoritarianism is a threat to democracy, what can be done to mitigate the threat?

In the United States, one might point toward our founding documents. Our founding fathers were deeply concerned about possible abuses of power that could infringe on the rights and freedoms of the people. To guard against such abuses, they included a number of safeguards in the Constitution, such as the separation of powers into the executive, legislative, and judicial branches; a system of checks and balances among these three branches; divisions between federal and state government functions; defined term lengths for elected representatives; and freedom of the press.

Yet while American mechanisms for protecting democracy have so far endured, they do not make the country immune to authoritarian rule. In fact, international surveys show that the people of the United States are moderately inclined to express authoritarian preferences and attitudes (Figure 1). Authoritarian inclinations among the people of the United States are roughly on par with those of the people of Chile and Uruguay. Among survey respondents, the people of Germany, New Zealand, and Sweden have the weakest inclinations toward authoritarianism, while the people of India, Kyrgyzstan, and South Africa have the strongest inclinations toward authoritarianism.

A leader with enough support to win the American presidency and majorities in the two chambers of Congress can effectively control both the executive and legislative branches of government through seemingly democratic means. If such a leader comes to power when a sufficient number of Supreme Court justices and federal judges are ending their terms of service, he or she may also be able to exert inordinate influence over the judicial branch through the appointment of judges. With all three branches of government compromised, the *trias politica* model fails the separation of powers test. Such a leader could also undermine the free press by limiting its access to public officials and casting doubt on reporters' objectivity and integrity, while using new mass communication technologies to circumvent the media and share messages directly with supporters.

While established institutional safeguards are important protections against authoritarian regimes arising in the United States, these defenses are not impenetrable. The last, best line of defense in a democracy is its people, and education is a critical shield against incursions of authoritarianism that threaten it.

Education in the United States has long been understood as playing a valuable role in instilling the general skills necessary to sustain democracy, including tolerance and political participation.<sup>52</sup> Subjects such as history, social studies, political science, and gender and ethnic studies can present opportunities for students to learn in empathetic ways about people who are unlike themselves. Coursework in these subject areas can build understanding of how various issues affect diverse groups and encourage students to see beyond their own social identities or positions.

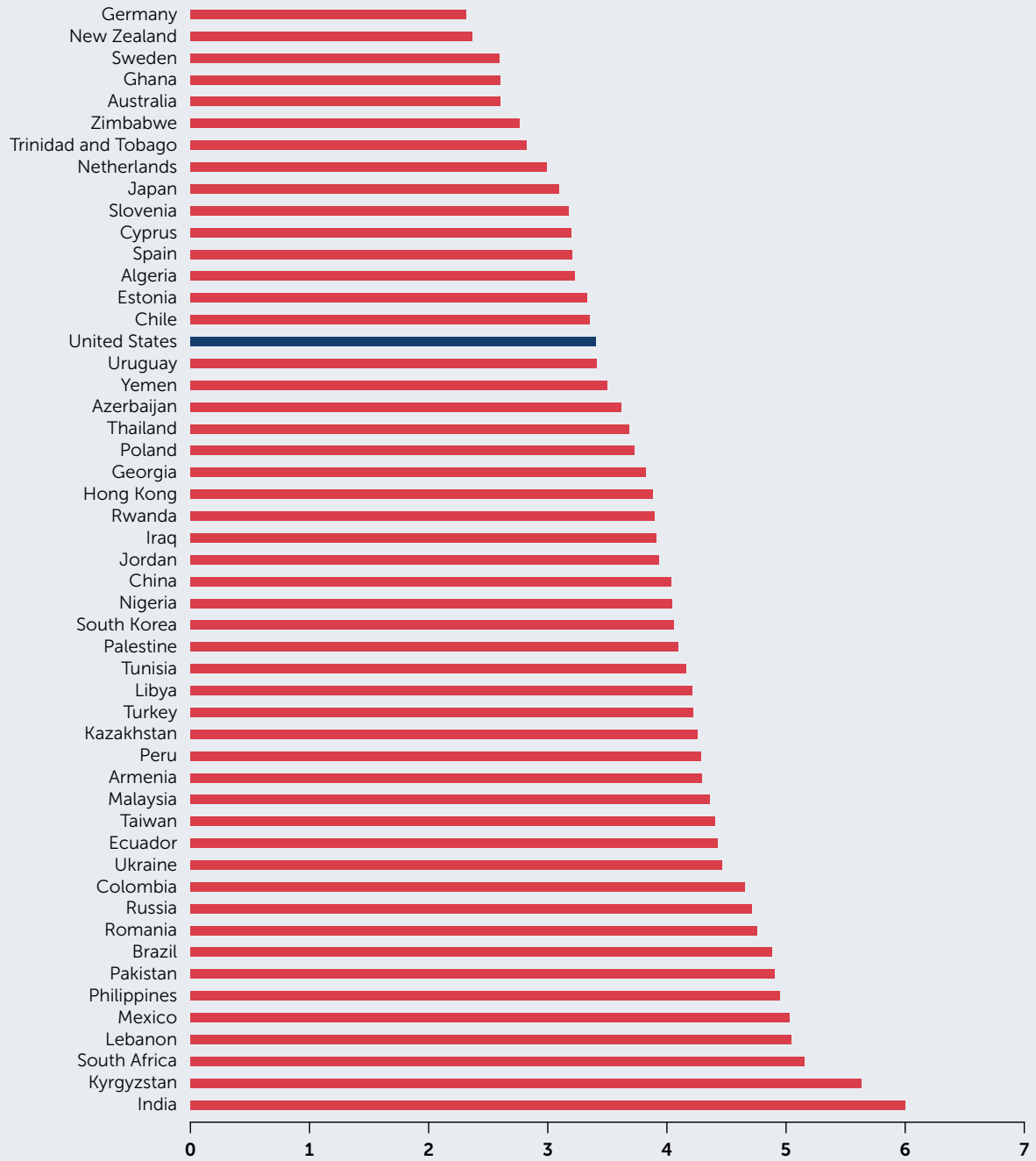
A good education also provides specific technical skills that can be used in the workplace. As technological change has increased the skill level required of entry-level workers, the education system must turn its focus increasingly toward preparing students for higher-skilled, higher-wage work, helping to contribute to a more prosperous society.<sup>53</sup>

51 Miller and Davis, "The Effect of White Social Prejudice on Support for American Democracy," 2020.

52 Glaeser et al., "Why Does Democracy Need Education?," 2007.

53 Carnevale et al., *Failure to Launch*, 2013.

**Figure 1.** People in the United States show moderate inclinations toward authoritarianism.



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the World Values Survey (WVS), 2010–14. Note: These results are based on a multilevel cross-country analysis; see Appendix B for additional information about the international comparison. The bars represent the average level of authoritarian preferences and attitudes in each of the 51 countries.

At the same time, the need for higher education to prepare students for gainful employment should not overshadow the role that education has always played in preparing citizens to uphold a democratic way of life.<sup>54</sup> Education for work and education for informed democratic participation are complementary, not contradictory, goals.

Authoritarianism’s recent global resurgence has led some observers to call more sharply and poignantly for the education system to act as a bulwark against authoritarianism.<sup>55</sup> But does more education, particularly at the postsecondary level, really offer protection against authoritarian tendencies?



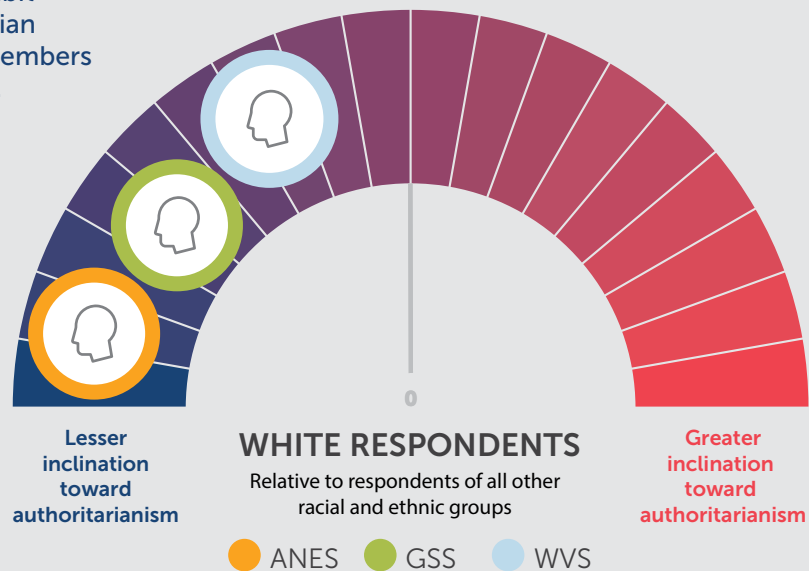
## Authoritarianism and Race or Ethnicity

Race has an important relationship with authoritarian attitudes and preferences.<sup>i</sup> Across educational attainment levels, White respondents exhibit less inclination toward authoritarian attitudes and preferences than members of other racial and ethnic groups when authoritarianism is defined according to parenting preferences (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. White respondents exhibit less inclination toward authoritarian attitudes and preferences than members of other racial and ethnic groups.**

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the World Values Survey (WVS), 1994–2014; the General Social Survey (GSS), 1986–2016; and the American National Election Studies (ANES), 2000–2016.

Note: The figure represents selected coefficients from three separate multivariate linear regression equations, one based on each survey; for full results, see Appendix A. The coefficients show the inclination toward expressing authoritarian attitudes among White respondents relative to respondents from other racial and ethnic groups.



A number of factors may contribute to marginalized racial and ethnic groups’ higher inclinations toward authoritarian preferences and attitudes. First, disadvantaged groups in a society tend to see fewer benefits from the existing sociopolitical system and therefore may be more open to

<sup>i</sup> In this report, we use the term Black to refer to people who identify as Black or African American and the term Latino to refer to people who identify as Hispanic or Latino. We use single terms for different racial and ethnic groups—White, Black, and Latino—to alleviate ambiguity and enhance clarity.

<sup>54</sup> Carnevale, *We Need a New Deal Between Higher Education and Democratic Capitalism*, 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Giroux, “Democracy in Crisis, the Specter of Authoritarianism, and the Future of Higher Education,” 2015.

alternatives. In the United States, individuals who do not identify as White are less likely than White individuals to rate living in a democracy as being “absolutely important” to them and less likely to be satisfied with the way democracy is working in the country.<sup>ii</sup>

Because authoritarianism prizes oneness and sameness, it may have psychological appeal to individuals and groups who are marginalized in society. Members of marginalized racial and ethnic groups are more likely than Whites to face physical, economic, and social threats, which may trigger the expression of authoritarian views. They are more likely to experience prejudice and discrimination, threatening their perception of their social value and sense of belonging, and they may adopt authoritarian views as a means of psychological protection.<sup>iii</sup>

Members of marginalized racial and ethnic groups may also be more likely to adopt authoritarian parenting styles as an adaptation mechanism to protect their children from the threats associated with differential law enforcement. As numerous studies have documented, police in the United States apply stricter standards of law enforcement to Black and Latino people than they do to White people. For example, Black and Latino drivers are disproportionately likely to be stopped and searched by police.<sup>iv</sup>

Differential law enforcement can have deadly consequences: over their lifetimes, Black men and boys are 2.5 times more likely than White men and boys to be killed in an encounter with police, and Native American and Latino men and boys also have elevated chances of being killed in a police encounter.<sup>v</sup> Parents of Black boys may try to protect their sons through strict discipline that instills obedience to authority. Learning strict obedience to authority may be viewed as an important survival mechanism in the households of marginalized racial and ethnic groups.

Demographic variables other than race—specifically, age and sex—seem to have minor, inconsistent, or insignificant impacts on authoritarian preferences and attitudes. Some surveys show that age has a minor positive effect on authoritarian preferences and attitudes,<sup>vi</sup> while another shows that age has a minor negative effect on these preferences and attitudes.<sup>vii</sup> Regarding sex, results are also mixed: some surveys show that women tend to be less inclined to express authoritarian preferences and attitudes than men,<sup>viii</sup> while another survey shows that women are more inclined than men to express authoritarian preferences and attitudes, although that finding is not statistically significant.<sup>ix</sup>

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ii The Democracy Project, *Reversing a Crisis of Confidence*, 2018.

iii Henry, “The Role of Stigma in Understanding Ethnicity Differences in Authoritarianism,” 2011.

iv Balko, “21 More Studies Showing Racial Disparities in the Criminal Justice System,” 2019.

v Edwards et al., “Risk of Being Killed by Police Use of Force in the United States by Age, Race–Ethnicity, and Sex,” 2019.

vi Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the General Social Survey (GSS), 1986–2016, and the American National Election Studies (ANES), 2000–2016.

vii Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the World Values Survey (WVS), 1994–2014.

viii Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the General Social Survey (GSS), 1986–2016, and the American National Election Studies (ANES), 2000–2016.

ix Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the World Values Survey (WVS), 1994–2014. See Appendix A for the coefficients for the age and gender variables in the GSS, ANES, and WVS regression models. The two statistically significant findings related to sex are consistent with the research of Brandt and Henry (2012), who found that women are more authoritarian than men in societies with high levels of gender inequality, but less authoritarian than men in societies with lower levels of gender inequality.

## PART 2.

# Higher Education and Authoritarianism



While people can express authoritarian preferences at all levels of educational attainment, higher education, especially in the liberal arts, appears to mitigate authoritarian tendencies. The mechanisms through which it accomplishes this are most likely multifaceted: postsecondary education encourages students to develop habits of mind that are antithetical to authoritarianism and enhances their ability to deal with diversity and complexity. These outcomes may help explain why formal education is strongly associated with a disinclination to exhibit authoritarian preferences and attitudes.<sup>56</sup>

Higher education strives to promote habits of mind that explicitly counteract the unquestioning acceptance of information and ideas that is characteristic of authoritarianism. These habits include independent thought, consideration of diverse viewpoints, critical examination of established orthodoxy, and inquisitive assessment. Higher

education also exposes people to diverse contexts, histories, ideas, lifestyles, religions, ways of life, and cultures. Through such exposure, students may learn to evaluate unfamiliar practices on the basis of evidence instead of assuming that such practices are detrimental or dangerous, as their cultural biases may have conditioned them to believe.<sup>57</sup> Thus higher

<sup>56</sup> For more on the negative association between education and authoritarianism, see Selznick and Steinberg, *The Tenacity of Prejudice*, 1969; Scheepers et al., "Social Conditions, Authoritarianism and Ethnocentrism," 1990; Werfhorst and Graaf, "The Sources of Political Orientations in Post-Industrial Society," 2004; Stubager, "Education Effects on Authoritarian–Libertarian Values," 2008; and Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic*, 2005.

<sup>57</sup> Dražanová, *Education and Tolerance*, 2017.

education prepares individuals to better deal with complexity and diversity in society, and prompts them to feel less threatened by differences of opinion or departures from shared group norms.<sup>58</sup>

These benefits to democracy extend beyond the individual: at the societal level, higher education tends to promote democratic culture and economic prosperity, both of which are associated with social, political, and cultural development.<sup>59</sup> Authoritarianism can arise in any society, regardless of the educational attainment of its population. At the same time, democracies that have highly educated populations are more likely to survive; similarly, societies with nondemocratic authoritarian regimes are more likely to become democratic if they have a highly educated populace.<sup>60</sup> In addition, among countries, a larger share of highly educated individuals is associated with higher levels of political tolerance.<sup>61</sup> Thus, as detailed below, higher education is the cornerstone of successful democracies that are not easily shaken by authoritarian threats.

Notably, some theorists reject the idea that education mitigates authoritarianism, instead proposing that individuals with particular personality traits are both less likely to be drawn toward authoritarianism and more likely to pursue higher education.<sup>62</sup> While such self-selection may exist, there is evidence that education does play a role in warding off authoritarianism.<sup>63</sup> One study conducted in the United States comparing

college attendees with non-attendees found that over the course of four years, those who attended college became significantly less authoritarian than those who did not.<sup>64</sup> While additional longitudinal research based on peer cohorts would strengthen the case for a causal relationship between education and authoritarianism, the evidence of a positive relationship between the two is irrefutable.

### **Higher education mitigates authoritarian preferences and attitudes.**

Analysis of data from three major surveys indicates that people with higher levels of education are less inclined toward authoritarian preferences and attitudes.<sup>65</sup> These findings align with previous research showing that individuals with higher education, particularly those with college-level education, are less authoritarian and more tolerant than those without it.<sup>66</sup>

Survey respondents with bachelor's degrees or higher were significantly less inclined to express authoritarian preferences and attitudes than those with some college coursework but no degree. After controlling for other relevant factors,<sup>67</sup> we found an inverse relationship between higher levels of education and authoritarian preferences (expressed as support for authoritarian political regimes and lack of support for democratic ones). Bachelor's degree holders were significantly less inclined and associate's degree holders somewhat less inclined than high school

58 Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic*, 2005. While Stenner presents higher education's role in preparing individuals to respond to complexity as a potential mechanism by which education mitigates authoritarianism, her own view is that individuals are predisposed to pursue higher education and be less authoritarian based on their innate capacity for knowledge and pre-existing cognitive skills.

59 Dražanová, *Education and Tolerance*, 2017; Inglehart, *The Silent Revolution*, 1977.

60 Glaeser et al., *Why Does Democracy Need Education?*, 2007.

61 Dražanová, *Education and Tolerance*, 2017.

62 Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic*, 2005.

63 The research reviewed and synthesized by Kenneth Feldman and Theodore Newcomb indicates that even though college students are less authoritarian than non-college goers, their personalities change between their freshman and senior years in a way that reduces their level of authoritarianism beyond their initial levels. See Feldman and Newcomb, *The Impact of College on Students*, 1969.

64 Trent and Medsker present evidence showing that individual predisposition does not fully account for the impact of higher education in mitigating authoritarian preferences. They found that while college students were more nonauthoritarian than non-college students from the same high school cohort, college students' levels on the nonauthoritarianism scale increased significantly during the years they were enrolled, while non-college students' levels on the nonauthoritarianism scale declined during the same time. Trent and Medsker, *Beyond High School*, 1967.

65 Our analysis in this section relies on data from the World Values Survey (WVS), 1994–2014; the General Social Survey (GSS), 1986–2016; and the American National Election Studies (ANES), 2000–2016. These surveys define authoritarianism using various proxy indicators: political attitudes for the WVS, and child-rearing preferences for the GSS and ANES. The main analyses used in this report were conducted using multivariate regressions; for additional information about the methodology, see Appendix A.

66 Dražanová, *Education and Tolerance*, 2017; Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic*, 2005; Selznick and Steinberg, *The Tenacity of Prejudice*, 1969; Scheepers et al., "Social Conditions, Authoritarianism and Ethnocentrism," 1990; Werfhorst and Graaf, "The Sources of Political Orientations in Post-Industrial Society," 2004; and Stubager, "Education Effects on Authoritarian–Libertarian Values," 2008.

67 In all regression results presented in the report, we control for all variables in the model aside from those being presented. For full regression tables with lists of all included variables from each survey, see Appendix A.



graduates to express authoritarian preferences and attitudes (Figure 3).

Surveys that investigate authoritarian preferences and attitudes through child-rearing perspectives yield similar results. In answering questions about which traits they see as preferable in children, individuals

with bachelor's degrees are significantly less inclined to express authoritarian preferences and attitudes, compared to high school graduates (Figure 4).

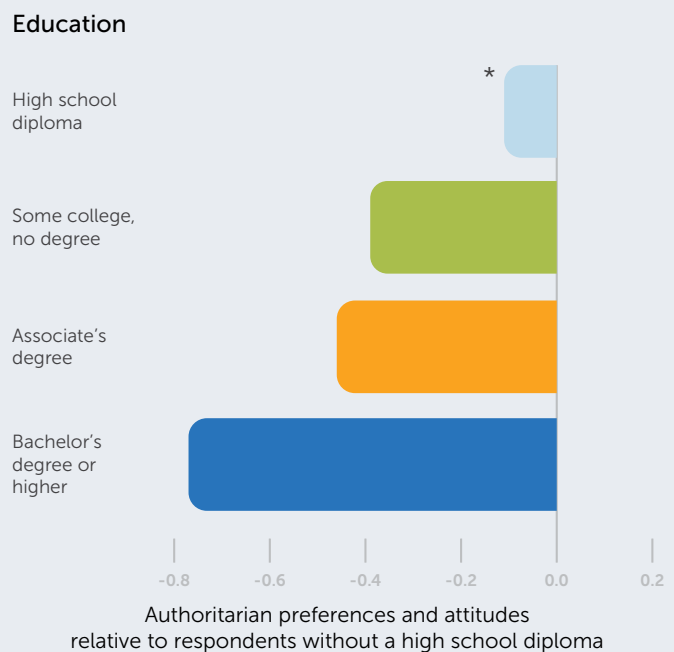
Overall, respondents with bachelor's degrees are less inclined to express authoritarian attitudes than those without bachelor's degrees.

**Figure 3. People with higher levels of education are less inclined toward authoritarian political preferences.**

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the World Values Survey (WVS), 1994–2014.

Note: The figure presents selected coefficients from a multivariate linear regression equation; for full results, see Appendix A. The coefficients show the inclination toward expressing authoritarian political preferences and attitudes by education level, relative to respondents with less than a high school diploma.

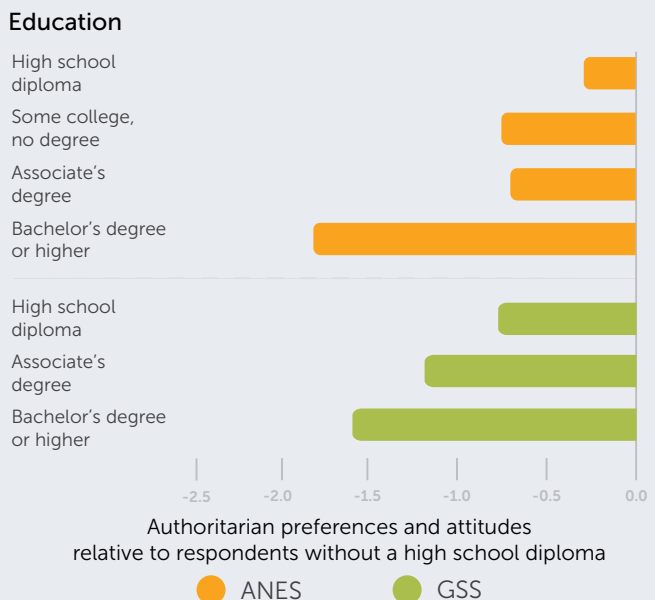
\*The coefficient for respondents with a high school diploma is not statistically significant, indicating that high school graduates are not statistically different from those with less than a high school diploma in their authoritarian political preferences and attitudes.



**Figure 4. People with a bachelor's degree or higher are least likely among educational attainment groups to show an inclination toward authoritarianism in child-rearing preferences.**

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the General Social Survey (GSS), 1986–2016, and the American National Election Studies (ANES), 2000–2016.

Note: The figure presents selected coefficients from separate multivariate linear regression equations based on the two data sets; for full results, see Appendix A. The coefficients show the degree of authoritarian preferences and attitudes as expressed through child-rearing preferences, relative to respondents with less than a high school diploma. The GSS does not collect data on some college, no degree.



## Liberal arts education is a valuable bulwark against authoritarianism.

America's founding fathers, including Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, saw liberal arts education in particular as critical for citizenship and leadership.<sup>68</sup> Almost 250 years later, the evidence continues to support their belief in the importance of the liberal arts to American democracy.

Postsecondary education appears to have a larger effect on reducing authoritarian preferences and attitudes in the United States than in other countries (Figure 5). One possible contributing factor may be that, in contrast to European education and training systems that emphasize vocational preparation, American higher education places a strong emphasis on a combination of specific and general education.<sup>69</sup> Such general education includes exposure to the liberal arts.

Importantly, general education has both economic and noneconomic value. While specific education conveys skills and knowledge that can have immediate economic value in the job market, general education prepares workers to be flexible and adaptive in the face of technological and other forms of change, improving their economic outcomes later in life.<sup>70</sup> Those benefits are passed along to the US workforce at large, thereby strengthening the US economy.<sup>71</sup>

A general education with a strong basis in the liberal arts plays an important role in helping students develop uniquely human qualities that are not only

important to work, but also essential in civic life. For example, the humanities, one crucial subset of the liberal arts, provide opportunities for students to learn critical thinking, self-reflection, creativity, empathy, tolerance, and communication skills—qualities that are useful in the full spectrum of one's life, including professional, personal, and civic pursuits.<sup>72</sup> The humanities also prompt students to develop qualities associated with responsible citizenship.<sup>73</sup>

Surveys comparing graduates with different major fields of study support the idea that the liberal arts are particularly effective in preparing students to resist authoritarian influences and defend democratic values.<sup>74</sup> While people with college attainment are less inclined toward authoritarianism than those with less education, within that group, college graduates who majored in the liberal arts are less inclined to exhibit authoritarian preferences and attitudes than students who majored in business or STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) (Figure 6).

## The relationships between education and authoritarianism are multifaceted.

There are several dimensions to the role higher education plays in mitigating authoritarian preferences and attitudes. Together, these dimensions help explain the connection between higher education and a lower inclination to express such preferences and attitudes.

Many of these dimensions reflect socialization to norms among college-educated peer groups.

68 Thomas, *The Founders and the Idea of a National University*, 2015.

69 Nash, "Journey to Work," 2012.

70 Hanushek et al., "General Education, Vocational Education, and Labor-Market Outcomes over the Lifecycle," 2017.

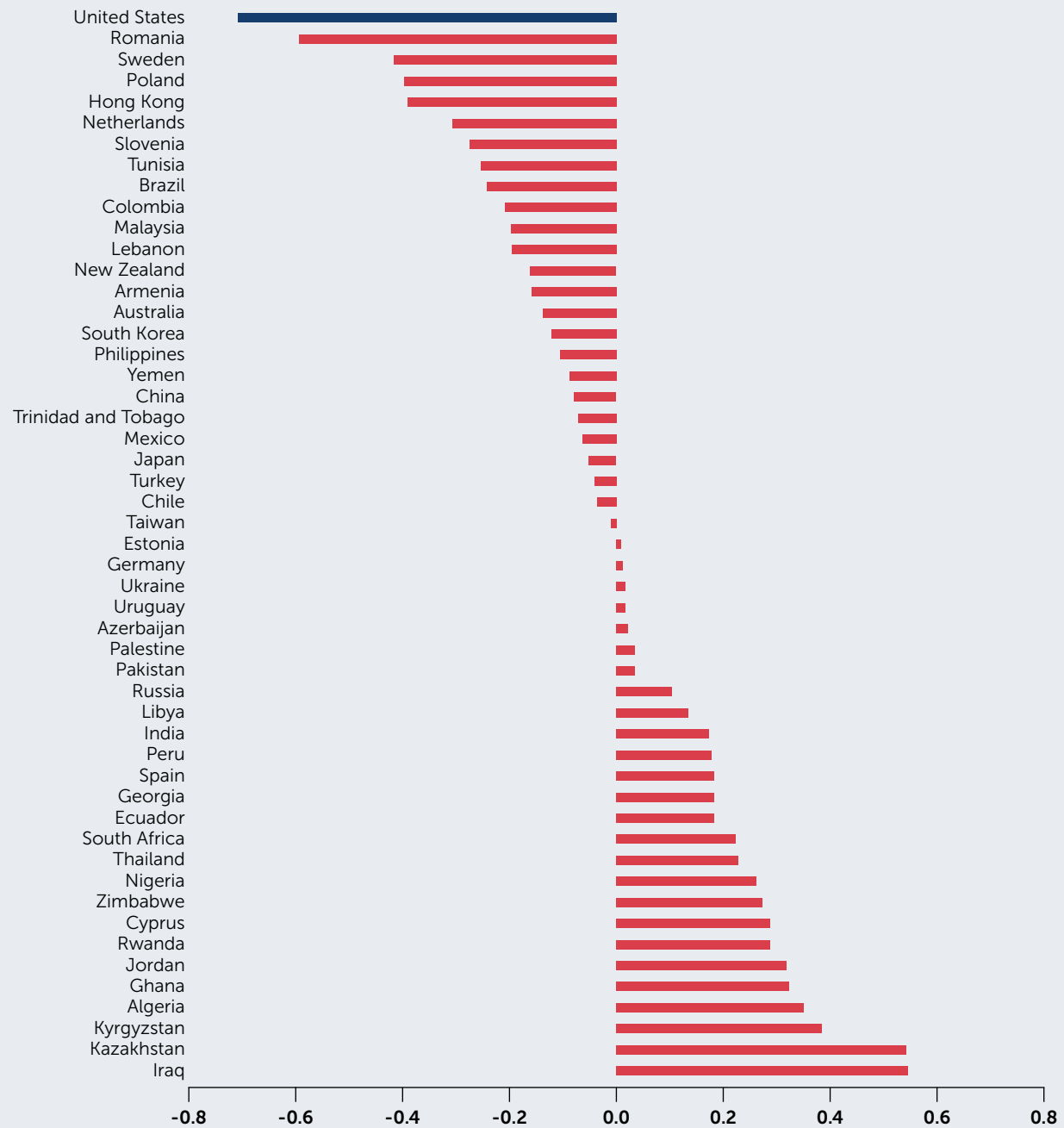
71 Krueger and Kumar, "US–Europe Differences in Technology Adoption and the Role of Education and Other Policies," 2003. For more on the value of general education, see Krueger and Kumar, "Skill-Specific Rather than General Education," 2004; Gould, "Rising Wage Inequality, Comparative Advantage, and the Growing Importance of General Skills in the United States," 2002; and Bailey and Belfield, "Community College Occupational Degrees," 2012.

72 Daniels, "Don't Underestimate the Value of Humanities," 2016.

73 Nussbaum, *Not for Profit*, 2010.

74 The liberal arts typically include the arts, humanities, and sciences. However, our analysis distinguishes the sciences from other liberal arts disciplines. For details on classifications by major, see Appendix C.

**Figure 5.** The United States has the strongest association between college education and lower inclinations toward authoritarianism.



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the World Values Survey (WVS), 2010–14.

Note: These results are based on a multilevel cross-country analysis; for full results, see Appendix B. The bars represent the relative strength of the association between postsecondary education and inclinations toward authoritarianism, as compared to the average across the 51 countries considered in this analysis.

On the whole, it is likely that the social networks people build in college affect their views and values related to authoritarianism and tolerance. People tend to interact with and be influenced by people who are like them.<sup>75</sup> As students enter college and acclimate to the higher education ecosystem, they are encouraged, through their interactions with peers and professors, to adopt the values and conform to the norms of the academic world.<sup>76</sup> In democratic societies, these values and norms tend to praise diversity and freedom of thought and expression, and to condemn authoritarianism and intolerance.<sup>77</sup>

The influence of these social networks extends after students leave college. After completing their studies, individuals with higher education tend to associate with others who have completed higher education, in part because of networks, friendships, and alignments they develop during their formative years.<sup>78</sup> Within these networks, they are more likely to reap social benefits by expressing views that are consistent

with those of their social group. They risk being ostracized or excluded if they express views that are fundamentally at odds with those of the group.

Based on these peer effects, some have argued that college graduates' pro-democratic views and opposition to authoritarianism may be superficial reflections of group dynamics that privilege acceptance and cohesion. These observers say that college graduates may only express such positions because they are expected to, rather than because they genuinely believe them and actively support related policies.<sup>79</sup>

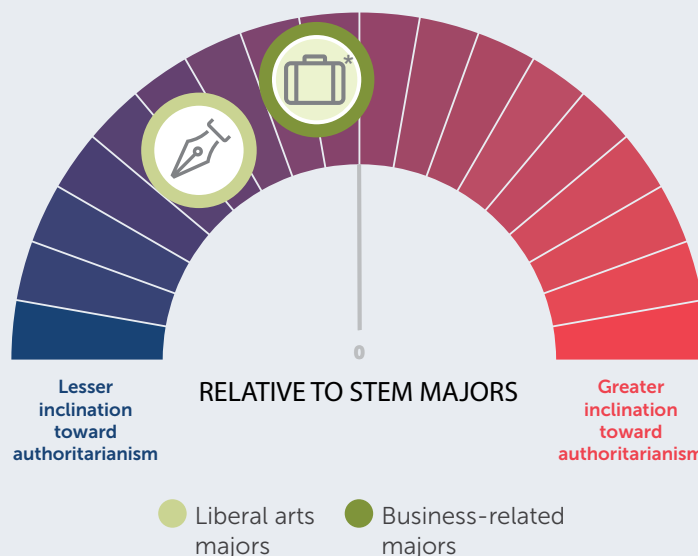
For some graduates, this may indeed be the case. But such fakery is unlikely to be a long-term or widespread phenomenon, as it would cause individuals who practice it to experience cognitive dissonance—feelings of discomfort caused by violation of an individual's internal need for consistency in attitudes, values, views, and actions.<sup>80</sup>

**Figure 6. Liberal arts majors are less inclined toward authoritarianism than business or STEM majors.**

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the General Social Survey (GSS), 2010–16.

Note: The figure represents selected coefficients from a multivariate linear regression equation; for full results, see Appendix C. The coefficients presented in the figure are relative to STEM majors.

\*The coefficient for business-related majors is not statistically significant, indicating that business-related majors are not statistically different from STEM majors. See Appendix C for the majors included within each of the three major categories.



75 Dražanová, *Education and Tolerance*, 2017; Lazarsfeld and Merton, "Friendship as a Social Process," 1954; McPherson et al., "Birds of a Feather," 2001; Aguiar and Parravano, "Tolerating the Intolerant," 2015; Pettigrew, "Intergroup Contact Theory," 1998.

76 Pascarella and Terenzini, *How College Affects Students*, 1991; Jacobsen, "Higher Education as an Arena for Political Socialisation," 2001.

77 Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic*, 2005.

78 Dražanová, *Education and Tolerance*, 2017.

79 Jackman, "General and Applied Tolerance," 1978; Meyer, "The Effects of Education as an Institution," 1977.

80 Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, 1962.



## Technological and Scientific Authoritarianism

Beyond the political sphere, the liberal arts and humanities can play an important role in addressing another kind of authoritarian threat: technological and scientific authoritarianism. In recent decades, the world has seen substantial technological and scientific advancements occurring at a rapidly accelerating pace. On the one hand, these developments promise progress beyond what has previously been possible. On the other, however, they have given private technology companies and individual scientists the power to unilaterally make major decisions that affect the lives of people across the globe. These decisions have the potential to alter the course of humanity and the habitability of our planet, for better or worse.

Scientists, corporations, and lawmakers are in uncharted territory when it comes to regulation related to such topics as the use of personal data, free speech in digital environments, and new genetic technologies. Yet while legal frameworks lag behind, actions taken in these areas have international implications and may not be easily reversed. For example, in the fall of 2018, Chinese scientist He Jiankui opened a Pandora's box by genetically modifying human embryos.<sup>i</sup> Tech companies such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter have instituted controversial practices concerning personal data, privacy, political speech, and censorship.<sup>ii</sup> Other examples of unilateral or unregulated technological and scientific decisions abound.

The scope and ramifications of such decisions have highlighted the acute need for technology companies and scientific enterprises to carefully consider how their work may positively or negatively affect the lives of people who don't have any choice or say in their decisions. Given the enormity of the choices they make on a day-to-day basis, STEM majors need a solid grounding in ethical considerations that are often the domain of humanities and liberal arts courses. Science and technology companies might also benefit from including humanities and liberal arts majors on their teams to balance considerations of what might be technologically possible with perspectives on how new capabilities could affect human society and the world at large.

i Stein, "Chinese Scientist Says He's First to Create Genetically Modified Babies Using CRISPR," 2018.

ii Leetaru, "Is Twitter Really Censoring Free Speech?," 2018; Frankel et al., "Delay, Deny and Deflect," 2018; D'Onfro, "Google's Sundar Pichai Was Grilled on Privacy, Data Collecting, and China during Congressional Hearing," 2018; *The Economist*, "Should the Tech Giants Be Liable for Content?," 2018.

It is more likely that individuals who attain higher education and become part of social networks that promote liberal and tolerant attitudes actually hold, or come to hold, those attitudes themselves.

We therefore assume that the survey responses we analyze in this report reflect the true views of graduates rather than views they might feel pressured to express. Several interlocking factors help explain

why higher education might be associated with a weaker tendency toward authoritarianism.

### PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS

Expressions of authoritarianism arise from a combination of two elements: authoritarian predispositions that individuals are born with or develop in early childhood, and normative threats that trigger these predispositions. These normative

threats can take the form of perceived challenges to established group values, rules, traditions, attitudes, cultures, or practices.<sup>81</sup>

Higher education may reduce people's sensitivity to these potential triggers by providing psychological protection. Individuals with higher levels of education typically have higher levels of self-esteem, personal security, and autonomy. They tend to feel greater control over their lives and feel less threatened by ideas and practices different from their own.<sup>82</sup> As a result, they are less likely to be enticed by authoritarian appeals that promise security from outsiders with views, cultures, or norms different from their own.

One important aspect of a sense of personal security is interpersonal trust, as people who feel more secure are more likely to develop interpersonal trust with others, since they are less likely to perceive others as threatening.<sup>83</sup> Our analysis shows that individuals with higher levels of interpersonal trust tend to be less inclined to express authoritarian preferences and attitudes (Figure 7).

## ECONOMIC SECURITY

Individuals with higher education are more likely than those without it to have economic security, which also contributes to a sense of psychological security. In short, people who control more resources tend to feel more secure in their socioeconomic positions in society. Because education is associated with well-documented economic benefits—including greater demand for one's labor and higher earnings—it

elevates the socioeconomic position of those who have it and offers them more economic security.<sup>84</sup>

Our analysis indicates that socioeconomic status and economic security play a role in influencing individuals' authoritarian inclinations and preferences. Indeed, our analysis shows that members of the upper-middle class tend to exhibit attitudes that are less authoritarian than those who are not members of this class (Figure 8).

Furthermore, unemployed individuals are more inclined to express authoritarian preferences and attitudes compared to those who are employed.<sup>85</sup> This may be because those with higher socioeconomic status and greater financial security do not see themselves as being in direct competition for jobs with members of "outgroups" in society, such as immigrants. Therefore, they are less likely to feel threatened by these groups, less likely to be enticed by authoritarian appeals to protection from these groups, and more likely to be tolerant of outsiders.<sup>86</sup>

## CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

Another way higher education may influence an individual's propensity for authoritarian attitudes is by promoting civic responsibility. Research shows that people with higher educational attainment are more likely to be politically engaged and active in civic life.<sup>87</sup> In the United States, higher levels of political interest and democratic activism are generally associated with lesser inclination toward expressing authoritarian attitudes (Figure 9).

81 Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic*, 2005.

82 Dražanová, *Education and Tolerance*, 2017. For more on these dynamics, see Lipset, *Political Man*, 1981; Weil, "The Variable Effects of Education on Liberal Attitudes," 1985; Jenssen and Engesbak, "The Many Faces of Education," 1994; McClosky and Brill, *Dimensions of Tolerance*, 1983; Sullivan et al., *Political Tolerance and American Democracy*, 1982; Sniderman, *Personality and Democratic Politics*, 1975; and Sniderman et al., "Predisposing Factors and Situational Triggers," 2004.

83 Dražanová, *Education and Tolerance*, 2017; Jenssen and Engesbak, "The Many Faces of Education," 1994; McClosky and Brill, *Dimensions of Tolerance*, 1983.

84 For more on socioeconomic status as a link between education and authoritarian attitudes, see Selznick and Steinberg, *The Tenacity of Prejudice*, 1969; Scheepers et al., "Social Conditions, Authoritarianism and Ethnocentrism," 1990; Werfhorst and Graaf, "The Sources of Political Orientations in Post-Industrial Society," 2004; Stubager, "Education Effects on Authoritarian-Libertarian Values," 2008.

85 In the multivariate linear regression equation based on analysis of data from the World Values Survey, the coefficient for unemployed individuals as compared to those who are employed is 0.4, indicating that unemployed individuals are more authoritarian than those who are employed. Individuals who do not participate in the labor market, such as students or stay-at-home spouses, were excluded from this calculation. For full results, see Appendix A.

86 Dražanová, *Education and Tolerance*, 2017; Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy," 1959; Lipset, *Political Man*, 1981; Jenssen and Engesbak, "The Many Faces of Education," 1994; Svallfors, *The Moral Economy of Class*, 2006; Persell et al., "Civil Society, Economic Distress, and Social Tolerance," 2001.

87 Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies*, 1977; Hillygus, "The Missing Link," 2005.

**Figure 7. People who are inclined to trust others are less inclined toward authoritarianism.**

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the World Values Survey (WVS), 1994–2014; the General Social Survey (GSS), 1986–2016; and the American National Election Studies (ANES), 2000–2016.

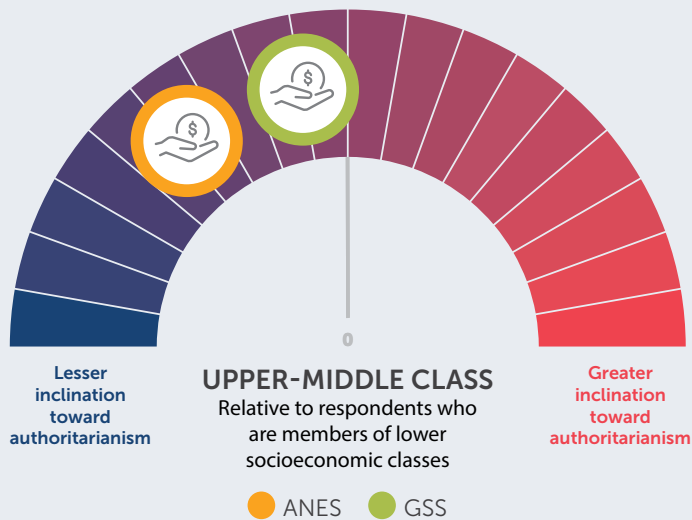
Note: The figure represents selected coefficients from three separate multivariate linear regression equations, one based on each data source; for full results, see Appendix A. The coefficients show the inclination to express political authoritarian preferences and attitudes for respondents who indicate that people generally can be trusted, compared to respondents who indicate a lack of trust or the need to be careful with other people.



**Figure 8. Members of the upper-middle class are less inclined toward authoritarianism than members of lower socioeconomic classes.**

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the General Social Survey (GSS), 1986–2016, and the American National Election Studies (ANES), 2000–2016.

Note: The figure represents selected coefficients from two separate multivariate linear regression equations based on the two data sets; for full results, see Appendix A. The coefficients show the degree of authoritarian inclination relative to individuals who do not identify themselves as part of the upper-middle class.



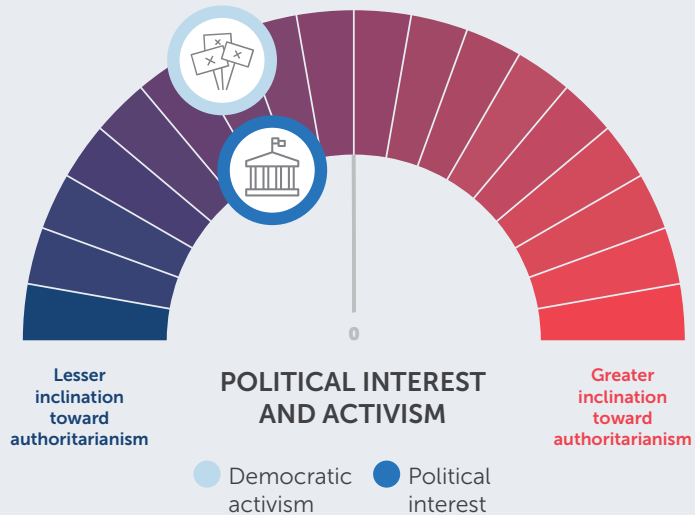
Education increases citizens’ political participation both by emphasizing that such participation is desirable and by improving students’ interpersonal communication skills and effectiveness in social interactions, which constitute important aspects of political participation.<sup>88</sup> Because educated individuals are generally better able to work within the system to

achieve their objectives, they have greater incentives for political participation. And indeed, college graduates are more likely to register to vote and more likely to report voting, helping to solve local problems, and working on community projects. They are also more likely to participate in community organizations, religious institutions, or political groups.<sup>89</sup>

88 Glaeser et al., *Why Does Democracy Need Education?*, 2007.

89 Glaeser et al., *Why Does Democracy Need Education?*, 2007.

**Figure 9.** As people’s levels of political interest and democratic activism increase, their inclination toward authoritarianism decreases.



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the World Values Survey (WVS), 1994–2014.

Note: The figure represents selected coefficients from a multivariate linear regression equation; for full results, see Appendix A.

## RELIGION

Whether individuals hold religious or secular orientations is another factor that may be at play in the relationship between education and authoritarianism. Education is associated with lower levels of religiosity.<sup>90</sup> In addition, higher education in the United States tends to be secular in nature and often exposes college students to secular culture and norms.<sup>91</sup> In college, students may encounter belief systems other than their own and ideas such as relativism that could affect the intensity of their religiosity. This may in turn affect their inclinations toward authoritarian preferences and attitudes, as religiosity is associated with greater inclination toward expressing these preferences and attitudes (Figure 10).

The association between authoritarianism and religiosity may derive from the authoritarian components of organized religion. Organized religion tends to promote the unity of the religious community and conformity to the norms and values established and enforced by designated religious officials. As a result, many major religions promote obedience to and trust in authority rather than encouraging adherents to inquisitively

examine or critically analyze prescribed rules of conduct and practices.<sup>92</sup> These elements of religious cultures and mindsets align with certain authoritarian attitudes and values, and may make religious individuals more likely to respond positively to authoritarian appeals.

## POLITICAL AFFILIATION

In the United States, both authoritarianism and higher education have often been perceived through the lens of the American two-party system. While the United States is a democracy, authoritarian preferences play a role in contemporary American politics, with notable differences between the two parties. While expressions of authoritarian preferences and attitudes can come from both the right and the left sides of the political spectrum,<sup>93</sup> in the United States, Republicans are more inclined to express authoritarian preferences and attitudes than are Democrats (Figure 11).<sup>94</sup>

Republicans are also more likely than Democrats to say that college faculty are politicizing the classroom by imposing their views on students, and to view colleges and universities in a negative light.<sup>95</sup>

90 Hungerman, "The Effect of Education on Religion," 2014.

91 Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic*, 2005.

92 For more on the association between religiosity and authoritarianism, see Dražanová, *Education and Tolerance*, 2017, citing Wald, *Religion and Politics in the United States*, 1987; Canetti-Nisim, "The Effect of Religiosity on Endorsement of Democratic Values," 2004; Jelen and Wilcox, "Denominational Preference and the Dimensions of Political Tolerance," 1990.

93 Young, "The Left-Wing Threat to Liberalism," 2017.

94 Previous research also supports this finding; see Hetherington and Weiler, *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics*, 2009; Federico and Tagar, "Zeroing In on the Right," 2014; Duckitt and Sibley, "A Dual-Process Motivational Model of Ideological Attitudes and System Justification," 2009; Federico et al., "Political Expertise and the Link between the Authoritarian Predisposition and Conservatism," 2011.

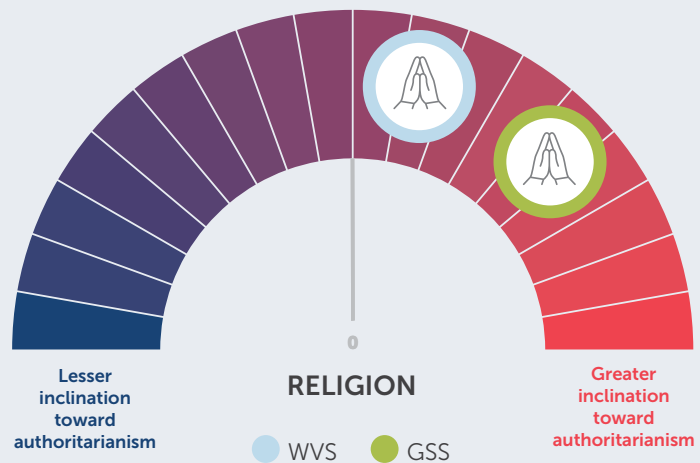
95 Parker, "The Growing Partisan Divide in Views of Higher Education," 2019.



**Figure 10.** People who are more religious are more inclined toward authoritarianism.

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the World Values Survey (WVS), 1994–2014, and the General Social Survey (GSS), 1986–2016.

Note: The figure represents selected coefficients from two separate multivariate linear regression equations based on the two data sets; for full results, see Appendix A.



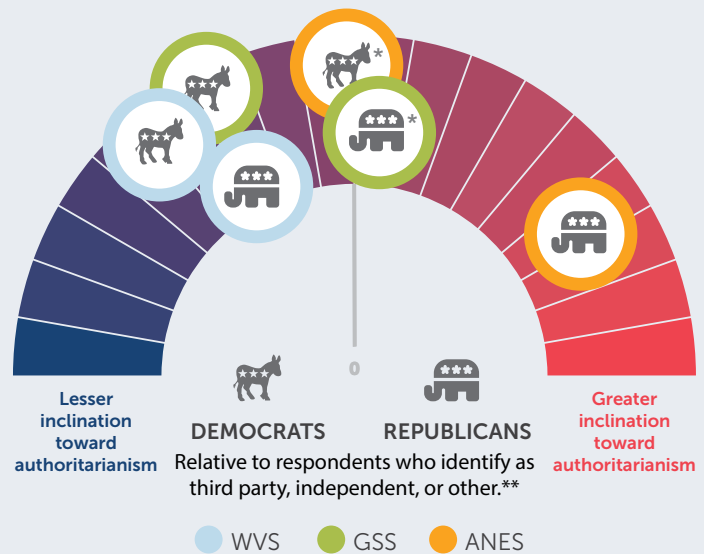
**Figure 11.** Republicans are more inclined to express authoritarian preferences and attitudes than are Democrats.

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the World Values Survey (WVS), 1994–2014; the General Social Survey (GSS), 1986–2016; and the American National Election Studies (ANES), 2000–2016.

Note: The figure represents selected coefficients from separate multivariate linear regression equations based on each of the three data sets; for full results, see Appendix A. The coefficients represented in the figure show the degree of authoritarian inclinations and the likelihood of expressing authoritarian attitudes relative to respondents who identify with a third party or as independent or other. In the WVS only, this category includes respondents who did not vote, which likely contributes to the WVS finding that both Republicans and Democrats are less inclined to express authoritarian preferences than respondents in this group.

\*The coefficients for Republicans in GSS and Democrats in ANES are not statistically significant, indicating that these groups are not statistically different from independent, third-party, and other supporters in their authoritarian inclinations (based on expressed child-rearing preferences).

\*\*WVS data also include people who did not vote.



It's worth considering, then, how partisan ideology might play a role in higher education's effect on authoritarianism.

Growing concern about the partisan divide in America has led to questions about whether education may be contributing to polarization rather than encouraging

all students to adopt less authoritarian and more tolerant attitudes, including a propensity to tolerate political views different from their own. Among those who view higher education as promoting political polarization, the arguments vary: while some charge that faculty impose their political viewpoints on students,<sup>96</sup> others contend that education simply

96 Parker, "The Growing Partisan Divide in Views of Higher Education," 2019.

moves individuals farther in the ideological direction that they are already inclined to favor and deepens their biases against opposing ideological positions.<sup>97</sup>

The latter phenomenon might be explained by the greater levels of political sophistication that college students gain through their studies, which strengthen their appreciation for an alignment between their political views and their values and interests.<sup>98</sup> According to this theory, individuals who are liberally inclined become more liberal with higher levels of educational attainment, and individuals who are conservatively inclined become more conservative. This theory would similarly suggest that individuals who are inclined toward democratic principles become more democratically inclined with higher levels of educational attainment, and individuals who have authoritarian inclinations become more authoritarian.

Even if democratically inclined individuals are more likely to pursue higher education than those with authoritarian inclinations, the research still captures the pro-democratic, anti-authoritarian effects of education. If higher education does little more than heighten people's pre-existing tendencies, it still bolsters democracy by strengthening its defenders and arming them with the necessary tools to defend against influences of authoritarianism.

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97 For an empirical investigation of this phenomenon using the conservative-liberal scale within American political dynamics, see Henry and Napier, "Education Is Related to Greater Ideological Prejudice," 2017.

98 Henry and Napier, "Education Is Related to Greater Ideological Prejudice," 2017.



# Conclusion

One of the most important goals of higher education in our society is to promote human flourishing. In a democratic system with a capitalistic market economy and without much of a social safety net, individuals cannot fully flourish if they do not attain economic self-sufficiency. Thus one important role of higher education is to ensure that people can become economically secure.<sup>99</sup>

In a democratic republic, however, the value of education extends beyond pure economic utility and includes important nonpecuniary benefits. Higher education plays an important role in cultivating the habits of mind, skills, and characteristics that are needed by active, well-informed, reflective citizens of the republic.<sup>100</sup> In the United States, college can and should instill the skills and abilities people need to participate in and protect American democracy—including the capacity to resist the trappings of authoritarianism in its many forms.

By exposing students to diverse viewpoints, encouraging civic responsibility, and providing psychological tools and labor-market skills, postsecondary education appears to protect against

the specific threats that tend to activate authoritarian preferences and tendencies. The higher employment and earnings associated with postsecondary education are safeguards against threats to economic security; likewise, the exposure to and comfort with differences that postsecondary education aims to instill—especially through education in the liberal arts—can mitigate threats to group identity and social norms.

Such protections are acutely needed now. As COVID-19 poses a threat to physical safety worldwide and decimates the global economy, history suggests that people worldwide may be inclined to seek out strong authoritarian leaders who promise to protect them from the turmoil of social, technological, and economic displacement. The people of the

<sup>99</sup> Carnevale et al., *Educational Adequacy in the Twenty-First Century*, 2018.


<sup>100</sup> Thomas, *The Founders and the Idea of a National University*, 2015; Buck and Conant, *General Education in a Free Society*, 1945.

United States are no exception to this rule, and our government is no extraordinary fortress. Despite the founders' best intentions, there is nothing inherent in our democracy that will necessarily keep it safe.

There is, however, something inherent in our education system that distinguishes it from others: the tendency to provide some form of general education grounded in the liberal arts to most students at the postsecondary level. This defining characteristic of American higher education may be more valuable than ever in the face of present challenges, offering adaptability to individuals and the country in the face of extraordinary economic and social change.

To ensure higher education's role in strengthening the American economy and American democracy, it will be essential that we expand postsecondary opportunity moving forward, particularly for the most vulnerable members of society. Even sustaining enrollment at the present levels will likely require substantial investments from states and the federal government. As educational institutions suffer severe declines in revenue as a consequence of social distancing practices implemented to fight the spread of COVID-19, the federal and state governments will need to step in to bridge the gaps.

This investment in American postsecondary education will be expensive—but not as expensive as the costs to both the economy and democracy if educational opportunity constricts. With the wolf of authoritarianism howling at the door, we need every reinforcement available to us to secure American democracy for future generations.



**IN THE UNITED STATES, COLLEGE CAN AND SHOULD INSTILL THE SKILLS AND ABILITIES PEOPLE NEED TO PARTICIPATE IN AND PROTECT AMERICAN DEMOCRACY—INCLUDING THE CAPACITY TO RESIST THE TRAPPINGS OF AUTHORITARIANISM IN ITS MANY FORMS.**

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## Appendix A. Regressions and Methodology

The primary sources of data on authoritarianism and its determinants used in this study are the World Values Survey (WVS), the General Social Survey (GSS), and the American National Election Studies (ANES). We analyzed data from the latest survey year of each data set, as well as for the range of survey years containing the variables of interest in each data set spanning from 1994 to 2014

(WVS), 1986 to 2016 (GSS), and 2000 to 2016 (ANES). Including a time variable in the analysis enabled us to test the reliability of the relationships between education level and authoritarianism over time. However, we did not assess changes in individuals' values over time because the data sets do not provide information about the same individuals over time.

### World Values Survey (WVS)

**Table A1.** Regression analysis of authoritarian preferences and attitudes, World Values Survey

Variables	Coefficient	S.E.
<b>Authoritarian preferences and attitudes (based on political views)</b>		
High school diploma	-0.114	(0.070)
Some college, no degree	-0.387***	(0.077)
Associate's degree	-0.463***	(0.127)
Bachelor's degree or higher	-0.773***	(0.074)
Age	-0.013***	(0.001)
Female	0.078	(0.047)
Unemployed	0.403***	(0.100)
White	-0.406***	(0.058)
Democrat	-0.390***	(0.068)
Republican	-0.249***	(0.071)
Interpersonal trust	-0.172***	(0.049)
Religiosity	0.118***	(0.025)
Political interest	-0.222***	(0.029)
Democratic activism	-0.223***	(0.017)
1999–2004	0.623***	(0.069)
2005–2009	0.738***	(0.068)
2010–2014	0.825***	(0.065)
Constant	5.338***	(0.147)
Observations	4,853	
R-squared	0.226	

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , +  $p < 0.1$

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the World Values Survey (WVS), 1994–2014.

### Dependent variable

The WVS allowed us to measure authoritarianism based on respondents' political regime preferences. The survey asks individuals whether they think the following are "very good," "fairly good," "fairly bad," or "very bad" ways of governing the United States:

1. Having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament and elections
2. Having the army rule the government
3. Having a democratic political system

These items measure a preference for either an authoritarian or a democratic political system. To

create a consistent scale across the items, we reversed the original ordinal scale for the first two questions so that higher numbers correspond with more authoritarian preferences. Our final measure of authoritarianism was an additive index of the three ordinal items and consisted of values ranging from 0 to 9, where 0 means no authoritarian preferences and 9 full preference for authoritarianism.<sup>1</sup> The three items are theoretically expected to measure a unique underlying preference for an authoritarian political regime. Thus, we created an additive index rather than analyzing the three items separately.

### Independent variables

The main explanatory variable of interest for our analysis is educational attainment. The WVS measures a respondent's level of education using three survey items: (1) whether the respondent had had formal education; (2) the age at which the respondent left school; and (3) the respondent's highest educational level attained. The best available proxy for respondents' level of education is the item measuring the highest educational level attained. For the purposes of our analysis, we used the country-specific educational variable, which measures educational categories specifically in the context of the United States. The WVS uses 10 categories in its classification: (1) no formal education; (2) 1st, 2nd, 3rd, or 4th grade; (3) 5th or 6th grade; (4) 7th or 8th grade; (5) 9th grade; (6) 10th grade; (7) 11th grade; (8) 12th grade, but no high school diploma; (9) high school graduate; (10) some university-level education without a degree; (11) associate's degree; (12) bachelor's degree; (13) master's degree; and (14) professional or doctoral degree. We collapsed categories 1 through 8 to form an educational category called "less than high school," and collapsed categories

12 through 14 to form an educational category called "bachelor's degree or higher." Our education-level variable thus included five categories: (1) less than high school; (2) high school diploma; (3) some college, no degree; (4) associate's degree; and (5) bachelor's degree or higher. While field of study creates distinctions among types of education at the secondary level, the WVS does not collect data on what field respondents studied in college.

Although most researchers (Norris, 2011; Campante and Chor, 2012; Chong and Gradstein, 2015) who use the WVS to measure the effect of education on political attitudes treat the original educational categorical variable as a linear scale, we find this approach problematic. Given that we expected the effect of education to manifest according to whether respondents complete a certain educational level rather than whether they finish a particular number of years of education, we modeled education as a categorical variable. This approach allowed us to establish at what level education starts to have an effect and to test for the (non)linearity of education-specific effects.

In addition to education, we included several control variables, all at the individual level: respondent's age in years, sex,<sup>2</sup> employment status,<sup>3</sup> and race;<sup>4</sup> whether the respondent is a Republican or a Democrat;<sup>5</sup> whether the respondent trusts other people;<sup>6</sup> the importance of religion in the respondent's life;<sup>7</sup> the importance of politics to the respondent;<sup>8</sup> and the level of the respondent's democratic activism.<sup>9</sup>

### Method

The dependent variable's 10-point scale (ranging from 0 to 9) might be interpreted as ordinal or

1 After adding the three items together, the original scale ranged from 3 to 12 (given that respondents who answered "very bad" to all three questions had a score of 1 for each item). We subtracted 3 from the original scale to facilitate interpretation of the index. This subtraction does not substantially influence the interpretation of the regression results.

2 Estimated by a binary variable where 1 indicates female and 0 male.

3 Estimated by a binary variable where 1 indicates that the respondent is unemployed and 0 employed.

4 Estimated by a binary variable where 1 indicates that the respondent is White and 0 of another race.

5 Republican affiliation is estimated by a binary variable where 1 indicates that the respondent would vote for the Republican party and 0 otherwise; Democratic affiliation is estimated by a binary variable where 1 indicates that the respondent would vote for the Democratic party and 0 otherwise. The original question asked which party the respondent would vote for as his/her first choice. The reference category for the regression model is the choice of "other"—that is, neither the Democratic nor the Republican party.

6 Estimated by a binary variable where 1 indicates that the respondent believes that most people can be trusted and 0 otherwise.

7 Estimated by an ordinal variable ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 4 (very important).

8 Estimated by an ordinal variable ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 4 (very important).

9 Estimated by an additive index of three variables measuring whether the respondent "has done," "might do" or "would never do" the following: (1) sign a petition; (2) join in boycotts; (3) attend lawful/peaceful demonstrations.

continuous. For the main analysis, we opted to consider the variable as continuous and thus applied ordinary least square (OLS) regression. We made this decision primarily to ease the interpretation of the regression coefficients. Nevertheless, we also performed an ordinal logistic regression analysis

while considering the dependent variable as being ordinal. The results of the ordinal logistic regression did not substantially differ from those of the OLS regression. This indicated that our models are robust to alternative specifications of the dependent variable.

## General Social Survey (GSS)

**Table A2.** Regression analysis of authoritarian preferences and attitudes, General Social Survey

Variables	Coefficient	S.E.
<b>Authoritarian preferences and attitudes (based on child-rearing preferences)</b>		
High school diploma	-0.766***	(0.039)
Associate's degree	-1.178***	(0.063)
Bachelor's degree or higher	-1.575***	(0.047)
Age	0.007***	(0.001)
Female	-0.293***	(0.027)
Upper-middle class	-0.156***	(0.029)
White	-0.629***	(0.036)
Democrat	-0.233***	(0.038)
Republican	0.051	(0.041)
Religiosity	0.321***	(0.014)
Interpersonal trust	-0.459***	(0.030)
Mid-Atlantic region	0.013	(0.071)
East North Central region	0.124+	(0.069)
West North Central region	0.134+	(0.079)
South Atlantic region	0.265***	(0.069)
East South Central region	0.700***	(0.081)
West South Central region	0.401***	(0.075)
Mountain region	0.061	(0.080)
Pacific region	-0.031	(0.071)
1987.year	-0.160+	(0.095)
1988.year	0.106	(0.107)
1989.year	-0.063	(0.105)
1990.year	-0.069	(0.108)
1991.year	-0.129	(0.105)
1993.year	-0.036	(0.105)
1994.year	-0.131	(0.094)

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Variables	Coefficient	S.E.
1996.year	-0.052	(0.094)
1998.year	-0.053	(0.095)
2000.year	0.015	(0.095)
2002.year	-0.174	(0.107)
2004.year	-0.129	(0.108)
2006.year	0.019	(0.105)
2008.year	-0.071	(0.100)
2010.year	0.055	(0.100)
2012.year	-0.055	(0.100)
2014.year	-0.103	(0.096)
2016.year	-0.059	(0.094)
Constant	4.330***	(0.122)
Observations	24,164	
R-squared	0.148	

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , +  $p < 0.1$

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the General Social Survey (GSS), 1986–2016.

### Dependent variable

Following a methodology operationalized by Stanley Feldman and Karen Stenner (1997), researchers have measured authoritarianism according to a set of child-rearing preferences. The use of these child-rearing indicators to measure authoritarianism relies on an analogy equating hierarchical thinking at home with hierarchical thinking in society, assuming that a person who prefers enforcing conformity in a child would likely also favor enforcing conformity in society. Historically, the GSS has used two distinct scales to rate child-rearing traits, one from 1973 to 1986 and another from 1986 onward. Unfortunately, due to substantial differences, the two scales have different properties.<sup>10</sup> We opted to use the variables available from 1986 onward. For this measure, the GSS asks respondents to rank traits according to how important they are to a child’s preparation for life, from most to least important. Authoritarianism was theoretically exemplified by respondents’ evaluation of the traits “obeys parents” and “thinks for himself.” Respondents who indicated that obeying parents is the most important trait in a

child, and thinking for oneself the least important, were considered to have the most authoritarian preferences. For consistency across our analysis, we reversed the coding of the variable “obeys parents” so that higher numbers indicate more favorability toward obeying parents. The final scale is an additive index of the two variables ranging from 1 to 9, where higher numbers indicate more authoritarian dispositions.<sup>11</sup>

### Independent variables

**Education.** The GSS includes several variables measuring respondents’ education. While *degree* refers to the highest degree respondents have earned, *coldeg* refers to the type of college degree respondents obtained. We combined this information in a new variable, thus distinguishing between an associate’s degree and a bachelor’s degree or higher (including master’s degree, doctorate, or professional degree). The new variable measuring education has four categories: less than high school, high school diploma, associate’s degree, and bachelor’s degree or higher. We introduced education into the

<sup>10</sup> The earlier version asked respondents to compare 13 traits, the later version five.

<sup>11</sup> After adding the three items together, the original scale ranged from 2 to 10. We subtracted 1 from the original scale to facilitate the interpretation of the index. This subtraction does not substantially influence the interpretation of the regression results.

regression model as a series of dummy variables in order to identify the specific educational level at which education begins to have an effect on authoritarianism. The educational category *less than high school* served as the reference category in our regression analyses.

In addition to education, we included several control variables, all at the individual level: the respondent's age in years, sex,<sup>12</sup> social class status,<sup>13</sup> and race,<sup>14</sup> whether the respondent is a Republican or a Democrat;<sup>15</sup> whether the respondent trusts other people;<sup>16</sup> and the strength of the respondent's religious affiliation.<sup>17</sup>

## Method

We present the results of the ordinary least square (OLS) regression as our main outcome. At the same time, we acknowledge that the dependent variable could be considered ordinal rather than continuous. We conducted ordinal regression analysis as well; those results were consistent with the OLS regression results we present in the report. Our analysis controls for year of survey administration as well as for nine US census regions. Because the GSS has collected data at inconsistent intervals, some years are omitted from the data set. Thus, our analysis includes data from 19 out of the 30 years between 1986 and 2016.

## American National Election Studies (ANES)

**Table A3.** Regression analysis of authoritarian preferences and attitudes, American National Election Studies

Variables	Coefficient	S.E.
<b>Authoritarian preferences and attitudes (based on child-rearing preferences)</b>		
High school diploma	-0.291***	(0.076)
Some college, no degree	-0.750***	(0.078)
Associate's degree	-0.702***	(0.087)
Bachelor's degree or higher	-1.797***	(0.077)
Age	0.008***	(0.001)
Upper-middle class	-0.286***	(0.049)
White	-0.817***	(0.046)
Female	-0.170***	(0.040)
Democrat	-0.030	(0.046)
Republican	0.699***	(0.052)
Religiosity	1.031***	(0.045)
Interpersonal trust	-0.610***	(0.042)
2004	0.511***	(0.085)
2008	0.312***	(0.075)
2012	0.104	(0.080)
2016	0.260*	(0.103)

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12 Estimated by a binary variable where 1 indicates female and 0 male.

13 Estimated by a binary variable where 1 indicates that the respondent subjectively identifies as middle or upper class and 0 that the respondent subjectively identifies as lower or working class.

14 Estimated by a binary variable where 1 indicates that the respondent is White and 0 of another race.

15 Republican affiliation is estimated by a binary variable where 1 indicates that the respondent identifies as a Republican and 0 otherwise; Democratic affiliation is estimated by a binary variable where 1 indicates that the respondent identifies as a Democrat and 0 otherwise. The original variable had eight possible values related to a respondent's party affiliation: (0) strong Democrat; (1) not strong Democrat; (2) Independent, near Democrat; (3) Independent; (4) Independent, near Republican; (5) not strong Republican; (6) strong Republican; (7) other party. Those answering positively to categories 0, 1, and 2 were classified as Democrats; those answering positively to categories 4, 5, and 6 were classified as Republicans. Those identifying themselves as (3) independent or (7) other were classified as "other," which is the reference category for our analysis.

16 The original variable measuring trust had three categories: "most people can be trusted," "it depends," and "you cannot be too careful with people." In our analysis, trust is estimated by a binary variable where 1 indicates that the respondent believes that most people can be trusted and 0 that the respondent believes either that you cannot be too careful or that it depends.

17 Estimated by an ordinal variable ranging from 1 (no religion) to 4 (strong religious affiliation).

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Variables	Coefficient	S.E.
Constant	5.149***	(0.118)
Observations	12,148	
R-squared	0.235	

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , +  $p < 0.1$

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the American National Election Studies (ANES), 2000–2016.

### Dependent variable

ANES core surveys are time-series studies that consist of pre-election and post-election interviews during presidential election years and post-election interviews during midterm election years. Similar to the GSS, the ANES includes child-rearing questions that can be used to estimate authoritarianism. The survey invites people to express their preference for children who are obedient and well-behaved, and who display good manners and respect for elders. Using the ANES, we measure authoritarianism according to the following key: “independence,” “curiosity,” “self-reliance,” and being “considerate” were coded as 0; the responses presented as alternatives to each of these four traits were coded as 2. Volunteered responses of “both” or “neither” were coded as 1. The sum of these four items resulted in an eight-point scale of authoritarianism. We also evaluated the option of excluding the voluntary answers “both” and “neither” (and thus treating these responses as missing), but found that this would create a four-point-scale variable, which might lead to statistical problems with an OLS regression. Moreover, it would lead to a loss of respondents in each survey.

### Independent variables

**Education.** The original variables measuring respondents’ highest educational attainment had 16 categories: (1) less than 1st grade; (2) 1st, 2nd, 3rd, or 4th grade; (3) 5th or 6th grade; (4) 7th or 8th grade; (5) 9th grade; (6) 10th

grade; (7) 11th grade; (8) 12th grade, but no high school diploma; (9) high school graduate; (10) some college, no degree; (11) associate’s degree—occupational type; (12) associate’s degree—academic type; (13) bachelor’s degree; (14) master’s degree; (15) professional school degree; and (16) doctoral degree. For the purposes of our analysis, we collapsed categories 1 through 8 to form an educational category “less than high school,” categories 11 and 12 to form an educational category “associate’s degree,” and categories 13 through 16 to form an educational category “bachelor’s degree or higher.” As in previous analyses, “less than high school” served as the reference category.

In addition to education, we also included several other variables: respondent’s age in years, sex,<sup>18</sup> subjective social class,<sup>19</sup> race,<sup>20</sup> whether the respondent is a Republican or a Democrat,<sup>21</sup> whether the respondent trusts other people,<sup>22</sup> and the importance of religion in the respondent’s life.<sup>23</sup>

### Method

We analyzed data for the years 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016. For simplicity in interpretation, we present our analysis in the form of an ordinary least square (OLS) regression for the dependent variable of authoritarian preferences and attitudes. We also performed the analysis using ordinal regression; those results are consistent with the findings presented in this report.

18 Estimated by a binary variable where 1 indicates female and 0 male.

19 Estimated by a binary variable where 1 indicates that the respondent subjectively identifies as middle or upper class and 0 that the respondent subjectively identifies as lower or working class. The original data set consisted of responses to a binary variable provided both pre- and post-election. For the purposes of this study, we combined both responses into a single variable.

20 Estimated by a binary variable where 1 indicates that the respondent is White and 0 of another race.

21 Republican affiliation is estimated by a binary variable where 1 indicates that the respondent identifies with the Republican Party and 0 otherwise; Democratic affiliation is estimated by a binary variable where 1 indicates that the respondent identifies with the Democratic Party and 0 otherwise. The original variable asked whether the respondent identifies as a Democrat, Republican, or Independent. The reference category for the regression model is the choice of “Independent.”

22 Estimated by a binary variable where 1 indicates that the respondent trusts other people always or most of the time and 0 that the respondent trusts other people half of the time, some of the time, and/or never.

23 Estimated by a binary variable where 1 indicates that religion is important in the respondent’s life and 0 indicates it is not important.

## Appendix B. International Comparisons

The international analysis presented in this report (Figure 1, Figure 5, and Figure B1) is based on a multilevel regression model using data from the World Values Survey, similar to the one we used to interpret authoritarianism in the United States (detailed in Appendix A). To adapt this model for use in cross-country comparisons, we omitted variables measuring respondents' race and party affiliation that are less relevant in an international context. We also adjusted the variables measuring education so they would better apply in an international context by separating them into five categories: (1) elementary school or less (which serves as the reference category), (2) incomplete secondary education, (3) completed secondary education, (4) some university without a degree, and (5) university degree.

### Method

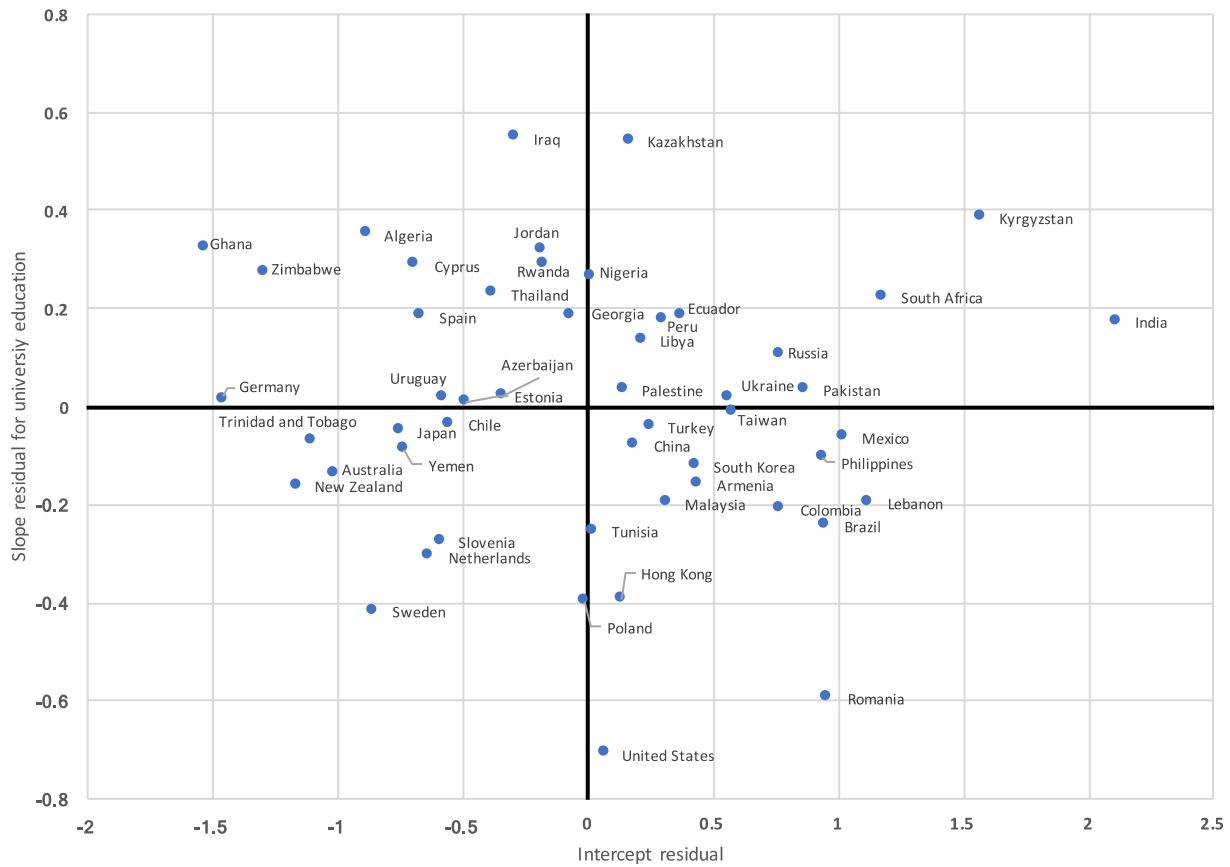
When conducting a multicountry analysis, we consider the data as having a two-level hierarchical structure with an individual level (level 1) nested within a country level (level 2). At the individual level, it is highly likely that two respondents from the same country are more similar to each other than either one is to a respondent from a different country (due to differences in such factors as national histories, cultures, and economies). Multilevel modeling allows us to statistically model the similarities between respondents from the same country for the purposes of comparison across

countries. In the multilevel model, authoritarian preferences depend on individuals' characteristics as well as their country of residence.

In addition to multilevel modeling, we employed random coefficient modeling to allow both the intercept and the coefficient of the variable "university degree" to vary randomly across countries. We varied the coefficient of the variable "university" because we assumed that the effect of attending university on individual levels of authoritarianism might not be the same in each country. Simply put, university attendance affects individual authoritarian preference levels to a much higher degree in some countries than in others.

Figure B1 presents our results with a plot of the intercept residuals versus the slope residuals. Countries on the right-hand side of the figure (higher than 0 on the x axis) are countries with above-average levels of authoritarianism, while countries on the left-hand side of the figure are countries with below-average levels of authoritarianism. Countries in the two upper quadrants (above 0 on the y axis) are countries where attending a university has a weak relationship with the level of preferences for authoritarianism, while countries in the two bottom quadrants have a strong relationship between attending a university and the level of preference for authoritarianism.

**Figure B1.** Comparison of authoritarian preferences and their relationship with university education around the world



Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the World Values Survey (WVS), 2010–14.  
 Note: In line with previous research, the United States appears to have the strongest negative relationship between university attendance and authoritarian preferences. This finding suggests that traditional predictors of authoritarianism such as university education may not apply as strongly in other countries as they do in the United States.



## Appendix C. Majors

Among the surveys we relied upon in this research, only the General Social Survey (GSS) allowed us to examine whether field of study or major degree has a differential effect on individual levels of authoritarianism. We therefore used data from the GSS for our analysis regarding the effect of major or field of study on authoritarian preferences and attitudes (Table C1).

**Table C1.** Regression analysis of authoritarian preferences and attitudes, General Social Survey

Variables	Coefficient	S.E.
<b>Authoritarian preferences and attitudes (based on child-rearing preferences)</b>		
Liberal arts majors	-0.303**	(0.102)
Business-related majors	-0.182	(0.117)
Age	-0.006*	(0.003)
Female	-0.160+	(0.091)
Upper-middle class	-0.280**	(0.096)
White	-0.660***	(0.117)
Democrat	-0.219+	(0.128)
Republican	0.154	(0.136)
Religiosity	0.342***	(0.041)
Interpersonal trust	-0.346***	(0.092)
Mid-Atlantic region	0.499*	(0.200)
East North Central region	0.535**	(0.195)
West North Central region	0.558*	(0.244)
South Atlantic region	0.553**	(0.191)
East South Central region	0.729**	(0.256)
West South Central region	0.803***	(0.229)
Mountain region	0.518*	(0.222)
Pacific region	0.232	(0.102)
2014	-0.099	(0.117)
2016	0.141	(0.003)
Constant	3.130***	(0.091)
Observations	1,731	
R-squared	0.133	

Standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , +  $p < 0.1$

Source: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from the General Social Survey (GSS), 2010–16.

To conduct this analysis, we made several adjustments to our primary methodology. First, we restricted the sample to respondents who had earned a college degree, since data regarding college major is only available for respondents who completed a college degree. Second, we included only survey years with variables providing information about respondents' college majors (2010 onwards). Finally, we divided majors into three primary categories:

**Category 1. STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) Majors**

Agriculture/Horticulture  
Allied Health  
Architecture  
Aviation/Aeronautics  
Biology  
Chemistry  
Communication Disorders  
Computer Science  
Criminology/Criminal Justice  
Dentistry  
Electronics  
Engineering  
Environmental Science/Ecology  
Food Science/Nutrition/Culinary Arts  
Forestry  
General Sciences  
Geology  
Health  
Industry and Technology  
Information Technology  
Law Enforcement  
Mathematics  
Mechanics/Machine Trade  
Medicine  
Nursing  
Parks and Recreation  
Pharmacy  
Physical Education  
Physics  
Statistics/Biostatistics  
Textiles/Clothes  
Urban and Regional Planning  
Veterinary Medicine

**Category 2. Business-Related Majors**

Accounting/Bookkeeping  
Administration/Public Administration  
Advertising  
Business Administration  
Education Administration  
Finance

Human Resources/Human Services  
Industrial Relations  
Marketing

**Category 3. Liberal Arts Majors**

Anthropology  
Art  
Child/Human/Family Development  
Communications/Speech  
Counseling  
Dance  
Economics  
Education  
English  
Ethnic Studies  
Fashion  
Fine Arts  
Foreign Language  
General Studies  
Geography  
Gerontology  
History  
Home Economics  
Humanities  
Journalism  
Law  
Liberal Arts  
Library Science  
Music  
Philosophy  
Political Science/International Relations  
Psychology  
Public Relations  
Social Sciences  
Social Work  
Sociology  
Special Education  
Television/Film  
Textiles/Clothes  
Theatre Arts  
Theology  
Visual Arts/Graphic Design/Design





***The Role of Education in Taming Authoritarian Attitudes***  
can be accessed online at [cew.georgetown.edu/authoritarianism](http://cew.georgetown.edu/authoritarianism).

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