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Authoritarianism and Political Impoverishment: Deficits in Knowledge and Civic Disinterest

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Past research shows that authoritarian individuals hold strong opinions about a variety of political and social issues, such as race relations and military conflict. What has not been established, though, is the amount of general political knowledge that authoritarians possess. In this study, three groups of college students were administered Altemeyer's Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) scale; most of them also received items assessing general political knowledge and specific knowledge about the 2000 presidential election, as well as items assessing interest in politics. Relative to students with low RWA scores, those with high scores possessed less political knowledge; moreover, they expressed less interest in learning about politics. In general, authoritarianism was unrelated to how individuals got their political information or how credible they found their sources. The implication that authoritarians hold strong attitudinal beliefs with weak political knowledge is discussed.

KEY WORDS: authoritarianism, interest in politics, political knowledge, RWA

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford (1950) published a landmark volume—*The Authoritarian Personality*—that continues to generate a substantial amount of research. Adorno et al. set out to measure authoritarianism as a personality construct. They wanted to establish how it formed within individuals and how it related to contemporary attitudes, values, and beliefs about the social order. In the decades that followed, psychologists have established a robust pattern of correlates for authoritarianism. The accumulated findings suggest that authoritarians have firm opinions about a variety of issues. Research has shown, for example, that those who score high on authoritarianism tend to favor the use of military force to resolve conflict (e.g., Doty, Winter, Peterson, & Kimmelmeier, 1997; Izzett, 1971), render guilty verdicts in jury situations (e.g., Narby, Cutler, & Moran, 1993), and hold fundamentalist religious beliefs (e.g., Hunsberger, 1995).

Perhaps the most famous finding regarding authoritarianism is the positive relationship between the variable and prejudice. In his classic review of the literature, Brown (1965) discussed the widening circle of prejudiced attitudes that the original researchers uncovered; those scoring high on authoritarianism were not prejudiced just against Jews but turned out to be “generally antagonistic to groups other than [their] own because [they] thought of these groups as having various disagreeable innate qualities” (p. 478). (For recent papers on the topic of authoritarian prejudice, see Lippa & Arad, 1999; Raden, 1999; Verkuyten & Hagendoorn, 1998; Whitley, 1999.)

Extending this original line of work, Peterson, Doty, and Winter (1993) investigated how authoritarianism related to non-ethnic prejudices. They found that those scoring high on authoritarianism held relatively more prejudiced attitudes than did low scorers toward AIDS survivors, drug users, and environmentalists. Presumably these three groups engaged the anger and resentment of authoritarian participants because they represented a threat to conventional morality or U.S. economic progress. McFarland and his colleagues uncovered the same pattern of correlates for ethnic and non-ethnic forms of prejudice in the former Soviet Union and Russia (McFarland, Ageyev, & Abalakina-Paap, 1992; McFarland, Ageyev, & Abalakina, 1993; McFarland, Ageyev, & Djintcharadze, 1996; see also Hamilton, Sanders, & McKearney, 1995).

The finding that authoritarians hold systematic beliefs about the social order can be organized theoretically using George Kelly’s (1955/1963) theory of constructive alternativism. According to Kelly, humans operate in the world as natural scientists, making predictions about the environment and the people in it to better control life outcomes. The characteristic ways that individuals construe people and events in the world cohere into what Kelly called personal constructs. One key feature of a personal construct is the level of permeability associated with it. The permeability of a construct system reflects whether new experiences can be readily accommodated into a person’s life. For example, moving from the west coast of the United States to the east coast is probably easier for someone with a permeable construct system. He or she would be able to adapt more quickly to alterations in weather patterns, lifestyles, and outdoor activities when compared to someone low in permeability. In essence, a person who has permeable constructs can smoothly adapt to changing situations by integrating new information. By contrast, impermeable constructs are rigid and prevent a person from incorporating life experiences in an adaptive way. Reasoning by analogy, Kelly (1955/1963) argued that

[a] construct which is permeable has more of the qualities of a theoretical formulation, as contrasted with a hypothetical formulation. . . . A hypothesis is deliberately constructed so as to be relatively impermeable and brittle, so that there can be no question about what it embraces and no doubt about its being wholly shattered or left intact at the end. . . . A theory is not so inflexibly constructed. It is stated in relatively permeable terms

so that it may . . . embrace many things which we have not yet thought of. . . . A theory, then, both provokes and accepts a wide variety of experimental ventures, some of which may even be antithetical to each other. (p. 81)

From the perspective of Kelly, authoritarians have developed relatively impermeable constructs regarding different groups of people and about a variety of social issues. Racist authoritarians, for example, are uncompromising in their belief about the superiority of their ethnic group. In study after study, people scoring high on authoritarianism are more likely than low scorers to endorse unambiguous statements denigrating other groups of people. These statements seem to reflect rigid personal constructs. In addition, a rigid construct system cannot accommodate contradictory information without collapsing. For those scoring high on authoritarianism, we argue that information contradictory to the original construct is largely ignored, and when it cannot be, authoritarians create new constructs that are separated or compartmentalized. Indeed, Altemeyer (1996) uncovered evidence that those scoring high on authoritarianism are unaware of the impermeability of their construct systems. In experimental data, he showed that authoritarian participants held rigid (impermeable) double standards when it came to issues like social justice, religious indoctrination, and states' rights. For example, Canadian authoritarians deemed it acceptable to force public schools in Canada to require the teaching of Christianity, but unacceptable for a Muslim state to require the teaching of Islam. In both cases, those scoring low on authoritarianism thought the teaching of any religion in a public school was a bad idea, and, furthermore, as a group they could not be induced to hold a double standard even when something they valued was at stake. In a strong statement, Altemeyer concluded that authoritarians were capable of holding "so many double standards that their behavior shows relatively little fairness and integrity" (1996, p. 144). This state of affairs seems likely to arise when a person possesses impermeable constructs that are kept compartmentalized from each other.

Given the recent focus on the cognitive shortcomings of those scoring high on authoritarianism (e.g., Altemeyer, 1996, chapters 4 and 5; Winter, 1996, chapter 7), it may be possible to establish further links between components of authoritarianism (e.g., intolerance for ambiguity) and constructive alternativism (e.g., constellatory networks of constructs such as "homeless" and "lazy" that might exist for an authoritarian). For now, though, the notion of impermeable constructs suggests two new possibilities for establishing links between authoritarianism and political activity.

Political Knowledge

To date, researchers have focused mainly on how authoritarianism relates to *attitudes* about a variety of political and social issues (e.g., abortion, communism,

drug use). But no one has examined the amount of political *knowledge* possessed by someone scoring high on authoritarianism. Simply put, how well do authoritarians understand the political world around them? Do they hold strong opinions but in fact are relatively uninformed about political issues? On the one hand, we might expect that people who possess strong attitudes about social issues should be relatively informed about politics. On the other hand, because authoritarian political attitudes are probably part of a rigid construct system, authoritarians should possess less accurate knowledge about U.S. politics. Certainly any misinformation that an authoritarian possesses would be relatively resistant to correction. Or, to put it another way, people low in authoritarianism would be *less* likely to process information selectively; they would incorporate new information into their knowledge base even if it contradicted prior information. Thus, we hypothesized that people who score high on authoritarianism possess less accurate political knowledge than their low-scoring counterparts.

Interest in Politics

The second domain examined in this study concerns the extent to which authoritarians express an *interest* in politics. Do people scoring high on authoritarianism show an interest in contemporary politics? What sources of information do they use to gather political information, and how much do they trust these sources? One might assume that people with impermeable construct systems should not feel the need to seek out political information. Such information, after all, would not likely change their perspective on an issue. Indeed, past research has shown that general inquisitiveness and openness to experience are negatively related to authoritarianism (e.g., McCrae, 1996; Peterson, Smirles, & Wentworth, 1997). A disinterest in seeking out new information may be adaptive for someone scoring high on authoritarianism; according to Kelly (1955/1963), people with impermeable constructs may be uninterested in knowledge because too much information can lead to “decompensation” where “the brittleness and impermeability of . . . [a] construction system fail[s] to support the alterations” that new information might necessitate (p. 81).

This possible link between authoritarianism and political disinterest has been examined before in a tentative way. Peterson et al. (1997) used a one-item measure of interest in politics and found it negatively related to authoritarianism for parents but unrelated for their teenage offspring. In the current study, we used multiple items to measure political disinterest. We hypothesized that authoritarians display less interest in contemporary politics, both liberal and conservative. In addition, we asked participants to tell us where they got their information about politics. We hypothesized that those scoring high on authoritarianism are more likely than their low-scoring peers to indicate that parents and friends are reliable sources of political information. This would reflect Altemeyer’s (1996) finding that authoritarians tend to travel in tight circles of trusted like-minded individuals.

Method

Participants

Three samples were used to test hypotheses, two samples from Smith College and one from the University of Michigan.

Smith sample A. Sample A consisted of 112 students from Smith College, a highly selective liberal arts institution in New England with an all-female undergraduate population. The data were collected during fall 1999, and students received introductory psychology course credit for their participation. On average, the participants were 18 years old ($SD = .94$); 82% marked their ethnicity as white, 4% African American, 12% Asian American, and 4% Latina. (Percentages do not quite add up to 100 in the samples used in this study because a small percentage of participants marked multiple ethnicities.)

Smith sample B. Sample B consisted of 77 students taking introductory psychology. To capitalize on the political excitement surrounding a presidential election year, we collected data 1 week *after* the November 2000 U.S. presidential election. This allowed us to ask fact-based questions about the election outcome. On average, participants were 18 years old ($SD = .51$); 77% marked their ethnicity as white, 3% African American, 13% Asian American, and 9% Latina.

Michigan sample. The University of Michigan sample consisted of 121 men and women recruited from an introductory-level course in personality psychology. Data were collected in October 2000, a month *before* the presidential election. The timing of this survey allowed us to ask questions about the presidential race between George W. Bush and Albert Gore. On average, participants were 20 years old ($SD = .86$); 73% were white, 13% African American, 8% Asian American, 4% Latino/Latina, and 4% other.

Assessment of Authoritarianism

Authoritarianism was assessed using Altemeyer's (1988, as amended on p. 23) Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) scale. For the past 20 years, Altemeyer (1981, 1988, 1996) has refined the characteristics of the RWA scale so that it possesses superior psychometric qualities (Christie, 1991). A 7-point Likert format was used to assess each of the 30 items of the scale (1, strongly disagree; 7, strongly agree). Half of the items of the RWA scale were phrased in the pro-trait direction (e.g., "Young people sometimes get rebellious ideas, but as they grow up they ought to get over them and settle down") and half in the con-trait direction (e.g., "Atheists and others who have rebelled against the established religions are no doubt every bit as good and virtuous as those who attend church regularly").

Cronbach's α was .90 for all three groups of respondents. The mean RWA score was 90.15 ($SD = 24.11$) for sample A and 90.03 ($SD = 23.03$) for sample B. The RWA mean for the Michigan sample was 104.28 ($SD = 22.55$). Consistent

with Altemeyer (1996), there was no gender difference between men ($M = 105.56$) and women ($M = 103.93$) in the Michigan sample. Note that respondents in all three samples scored well below the theoretical neutral point of the RWA scale ($M = 120$), indicating that participants were generally non-authoritarian.

Political Knowledge

General knowledge. General political knowledge was assessed in Smith sample A and the Michigan sample by a 17-item quiz that covered four conceptual domains: U.S. congressional facts (4 items), U.S. civic facts (6 items), U.S. ideological knowledge (3 items), and identification of world leaders (4 items). Questions were updated from Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), as described in Robinson, Shaver, and Wrightsman (1999, pp. 610–614) [examples: for congressional facts, “Which political party has the most members in the House of Representatives in Washington?” (Republicans); for civic facts, “How long is the term of a United States senator?” (6 years); for ideological knowledge, “Some people believe that we should spend much less money for national defense. Where would you place the Democratic Party on this scale (1 to 7 points)? Where would you place the Republican Party on this scale (1 to 7 points)?” (scored correct if the rating for the Democratic Party was higher than the rating for the Republican Party); for identification of world leaders, “Who is Boris Yeltsin?” (president of Russia)]. The mean number of correct answers was computed for each subscale along with the total number correct across all 17 items.¹

Election knowledge. To take advantage of the 2000 presidential elections, we asked the Michigan sample two questions about the Republican ticket and two about the Democratic ticket (examples: “In what city was the 2000 Republican Convention?”, “Who is Albert Gore’s running mate for the presidential election?”). Similarly, Smith sample B was asked nine questions about the 2000 presidential election returns (examples: “As it stands right now, did Bush or Gore win the popular vote?”, “Who was the presidential candidate for the Reform Party?”). All of these items, with percentages of correct responses, are reproduced in the Appendix.

Interest in Politics

Interest in politics was measured in Smith sample B and the Michigan sample in multiple ways. First, personal interest in politics was assessed by five items: “How important are political and social issues to you (1, Not at all important; 5, Very important)?”, “I like to discuss politics with friends,” “I do not like it when my professors use examples from politics to illustrate points” (reverse-scored), “I

¹ The exact items we used from Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) and their classification into the four conceptual subscales are available from the first author.

do not like reading political commentary in newspapers and magazines” (reverse-scored), and “Most discussions of politics are boring” (reverse-scored). The latter four questions were answered on a 5-point scale (1, strongly disagree; 5, strongly agree). Cronbach’s α was .87 for sample B and .78 for the Michigan sample.

Second, the importance of particular political and social events was assessed using items from the political salience scale (developed by Duncan & Stewart, 2001; see also Stewart & Healy, 1989). Participants were asked to “please rate each of the following events or social issues for how personally meaningful it was to you.” A 3-point scale was used (1, not at all important or personally meaningful; 3, very important or personally meaningful). Each of the six events was classified as either a liberal or conservative social issue. The three issues that liberals might find more important were AIDS, the environment, and gay rights. The three issues that conservatives might find more important were the Bush presidential campaign, the collapse of communism, and the continuing war on drugs.

Finally, the origins and credibility of political information were assessed with a seven-item checklist. Respondents were asked, “From what sources do you get your information about politics?” Possible sources that could be checked were major newspapers (non-college), magazines, discussions with family, discussions with friends, television, the Internet, and courses in college. Newspapers and magazines were summed to represent printed sources of information, family and friends were summed to represent relational sources of information, television and the Internet were summed to represent visual displays of information, and college courses represented a source of information from a (presumably expert) authority figure. After marking whether or not they used each of the seven sources, respondents then rated how “credible (or trustworthy)” each source of information was, irrespective of whether they actually used the source (1, not at all trustworthy; 3, usually trustworthy). Means and standard deviations for all of the interest in politics scales are reproduced in Table I.

Results

Political Knowledge

Correlation results for the political knowledge items are presented in Table II. In terms of general political knowledge, both Smith sample A and the Michigan sample were fairly comparable across knowledge domains (although the Smith sample identified more world leaders correctly). Both samples were weakest on U.S. congressional facts (on average, about 35% of the items correct) but were more knowledgeable about ideological polarities in U.S. government (on average, about 75% correct). According to Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), the scores across all items of the test would place both samples somewhere near the top of the “middle knowledge class.” (The “upper knowledge class” answered 70% of the questions correctly.)

Table I. Authoritarianism Correlated With Interest in Politics and Sources and Credibility of Political Information

	Smith sample B			Michigan sample		
	Mean	SD	<i>r</i>	Mean	SD	<i>r</i>
Personal interest in politics (5 items)	17.78	4.70	-.35*	15.50	4.14	-.23*
Saliency of political and social events						
Liberal events (3 items)	6.96	1.28	-.37**	6.14	1.60	-.38**
Conservative events (3 items)	5.75	1.35	.14	5.31	1.36	-.01
Sources of political information						
Newspapers and magazines	1.12	.78	-.18	.71	.80	-.13
Family and friends	1.57	.57	-.28*	1.24	.75	-.03
TV and the Internet	1.52	.60	-.06	1.24	.75	-.13
College courses	.19	.40	.05	.18	.38	.02
Credibility of information source						
Newspapers and magazines	2.67	.47	.13	2.50	.50	-.06
Family and friends	2.12	.39	-.05	2.05	.43	.05
TV and the Internet	2.21	.58	.32*	1.96	.44	.18†
College courses	2.49	.56	-.25*	2.30	.57	-.28*

Note. Item means are reported for the credibility scales. Thus, the eight means can be compared against each other.

† $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$.

In support of our hypothesis, RWA scores in both samples were significantly and negatively related to U.S. civic and ideological knowledge. In addition, RWA was significantly negatively correlated with U.S. congressional facts for the Smith sample and marginally negatively correlated with identification of world leaders for the Michigan sample. Total political knowledge and RWA were significantly negatively correlated for both samples. (Note that no correlation was positive for any domain of knowledge.)

As shown in the lower part of Table II, the year 2000 presidential election items were also negatively related to RWA for Smith sample B and the Michigan sample. In particular, the Smith respondents who scored higher on RWA were less knowledgeable than their lower-scoring peers about the election outcomes 1 week after Tuesday, 7 November.² Michigan respondents scoring high on RWA were also less knowledgeable about the Democratic and Republican pre-election questions.

² The relationship between RWA and knowledge about the November election outcomes does not seem to be a function of how much election coverage participants watched. RWA was uncorrelated with how late the participants in the Smith sample stayed up to watch the Tuesday night election results ($r = -.08$). On average, respondents stayed up until midnight, with the mode (20%) staying up until 2 or 3 a.m. Also, 17% of the sample did not watch any election coverage, and their scores on RWA did not differ from those who watched any coverage.

Table II. Authoritarianism and Political Knowledge

	Correlation with authoritarianism					
	Smith sample A			Michigan sample		
	Mean	SD	<i>r</i>	Mean	SD	<i>r</i>
General political knowledge						
U.S. congressional facts (4 items)	1.33	0.85	-.25*	1.40	0.94	-.10
U.S. civic knowledge (6 items)	4.16	1.35	-.21*	4.02	1.59	-.20*
U.S. ideological knowledge (3 items)	2.32	0.99	-.32**	2.19	0.94	-.28*
Identification of world leaders (4 items)	2.74	1.12	-.13	1.98	1.12	-.17†
Total political knowledge (17 items)	10.55	2.89	-.33**	9.78	3.60	-.25*
	Smith sample B			Michigan sample		
	Mean	SD	<i>r</i>	Mean	SD	<i>r</i>
Year 2000 presidential election knowledge						
Democratic pre-election (2 items)				1.00	0.74	-.26*
Republican pre-election (2 items)				0.78	0.76	-.24*
November election returns (9 items)	5.44	2.38	-.30*			

Note. Smith sample A, *N* = 112; Michigan sample, *N* = 121; Smith sample B, *N* = 77. General political knowledge items were updated from Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996 (as described in Robinson et al., 1999). See the Appendix for presidential election knowledge items.

†*p* < .10, **p* < .05, ***p* < .001.

Interest in Politics

The results for the political interest items are presented in Table I. In both Smith sample B and the Michigan sample, RWA was significantly negatively related to personal interest in politics. Furthermore, those scoring high on RWA found the liberal social issues significantly less important than did their lower-scoring peers. By contrast, the subjective importance of the conservative issues was neither positively nor negatively related to RWA.

In general, none of the potential sources of information was systematically related to RWA. There was one significant correlation for the Smith sample: Contrary to expectations, women who scored high on RWA did *not* use family and friends as sources of information. In terms of source credibility, a more systematic pattern began to emerge. The more authoritarian respondents in both samples (relative to their lower-scoring peers) did *not* view their college courses as a source of reliable information, but they did view television and the Internet as relatively credible (albeit the correlation for the Michigan sample was marginal, *p* < .10).

Discussion

Authoritarianism continues to organize people’s attitudes about a variety of important social issues. Despite attitudinal and ideological consistency, however, this study showed that those who scored higher on authoritarianism possessed less

political knowledge than those who scored lower. They also expressed less interest in contemporary politics. Interestingly, people who scored higher on authoritarianism seemed to get their political information from the same sources as those who scored lower. The more authoritarian respondents did, however, differ somewhat from their less authoritarian peers in the amount of trust they placed in different sources of information.

Political Ignorance

One of the most striking findings in this study was the negative correlation between political knowledge and authoritarianism. Those scoring higher on authoritarianism have less factual knowledge about American civics relative to those scoring lower on authoritarianism, and they were less able to distinguish the ideological differences between the two main political parties in the United States (Democratic and Republican parties). This lack of political astuteness is not limited to items on a general political knowledge quiz. The more authoritarian students were also less informed about the “hot topics” surrounding the U.S. 2000 presidential election. These findings are interesting because past research has shown that authoritarians tend to be highly supportive of their country’s political orthodoxy. This faith in government, however, does not seem to be based on solid political knowledge.³ Holding strongly rooted attitudes without a comparable basis in factual understanding is problematic in a complex democratic society where people must make political decisions.

A future question to explore is the extent to which authoritarian lack of knowledge is limited to the political domain. Past research has been mixed in this regard. On the one hand, some research suggests that authoritarians are less interested in higher education (e.g., Greenberg, Marvin, & Bivins, 1959) and, more specifically, authoritarian attitudes about mental illness are negatively correlated with knowledge about mental illness (Lieberman, 1970). On the other hand, recent work finds that authoritarianism does not relate to knowledge about AIDS (Witt, 1989) or factual information about World War II (Yelland & Stone, 1996). Thus, those scoring high on authoritarianism are not deficient in all domains of knowledge. Future work could try to isolate topics where authoritarians might excel in terms of knowledge. However, as indicated by Yelland and Stone (1996) and the current study, the more authoritarian participants do not possess greater knowledge about U.S. military successes or American civics—subjects that patriotic citizens might be expected to know a lot about.⁴

³ To reinforce this point, two people who scored in the top 5% of RWA scores in Smith sample A did not correctly identify the current vice president of the United States (Albert Gore). The four people in the Michigan sample who failed to identify Gore all scored about 1 standard deviation above the RWA mean.

⁴ The implications of emotionality for authoritarian knowledge should also be explored. Research by Marcus and MacKuen (1993) suggests that emotional states such as anxiety propel people to seek out

Authoritarianism and Apathy

In addition to possessing less knowledge about political matters, those scoring higher on authoritarianism were disinterested in learning about politics. Furthermore, they rated liberal issues as unimportant but did not endorse the importance of the conservative issues. Three different points regarding these findings should be made.

First, it is probably the case that the liberal issues are perceived as challenging the status quo of American life and so turn off more authoritarian participants. By contrast, conservatism as an ideology seems to focus more on maintaining traditions and the status quo. Thus, during economically prosperous times such as the late 1990s (in the United States), it may be that many conservative issues had the support of people scoring high or low on authoritarianism. The lack of any positive results, however, does not mean that all political issues are unimportant. As argued by Duncan, Peterson, and Winter (1997), issues that activate traditional moral outrage in a particular sample (e.g., anti-abortion rights movements) may be the ones likely to galvanize authoritarian support.

Second, the lack of any positive relationships between authoritarianism and political interest may indicate that people scoring high on RWA are rather apathetic about politics until social threats begin to accumulate. Archival research has shown that national-level indicators of authoritarianism can rise during socially and economically threatening periods (e.g., Doty, Peterson, & Winter, 1991; McCann, 1997, 1999; Sales, 1972, 1973). Research at the individual level also shows complex relations between societal threat and the activation of authoritarian predispositions (Feldman & Stenner, 1997). Perhaps authoritarian engagement with politics necessitates two components: a threat that can be externalized by authoritarian predispositions, and a leader to activate latent aggressiveness toward this threat. Unless both of these conditions are met, authoritarian interest in politics may lie dormant.

Third, the current participants are not authoritarian in any objective sense. For example, the highest RWA score in either Smith sample was 150 (which represents an item-mean of 5 out of a 7-point Likert scale). Thus, we are not examining the interests of "true" authoritarians. It may very well be that many who score objectively high on the RWA scale (e.g., 150 and above) are quite interested in the activity of right-wing organizations where violence, moral authority, and traditional hierarchy intersect. The limits of student samples for generalizing psychological phenomena to the larger society have been underscored by Sears (1986). In

political information. This might not be the case, however, for authoritarians. It might be that when authoritarians are threatened and made anxious, they do *not* seek out further information. Impermeable construct systems may short-circuit the gathering of political knowledge and lead people to foreclose on a candidate offering simplistic solutions to threatening issues. How emotionality influences information gathering is clearly an important topic for clarifying when authoritarianism is positively or negatively related to political knowledge.

light of his argument, it may be that the current study underestimates the role of authoritarianism for understanding political interests and involvement. Note, however, that it might also be the case that the current study underestimates the lack of political knowledge of true authoritarians. By definition, college students are an educated group; how might less educated authoritarians perform on the political knowledge quizzes? These kinds of issues can be resolved empirically by collecting data from people of diverse ages and education levels.

In sum, participants in our study who scored relatively high on authoritarianism were somewhat apathetic and ignorant about contemporary politics. Interestingly, however, they drew their knowledge about politics from the same sources as their lower-scoring peers. So their lack of political savvy and interest does not seem to be a function of greater or lesser exposure to different sources of political information. (The fact that they distrusted their university professors and highlighted the television and Internet as credible sources of information, however, may be problematic for many educators, especially those concerned about the proliferation of Internet sites broadcasting information of questionable quality.) These findings suggest that people scoring high on authoritarianism are dialed out of the general political process, perhaps because impermeable construct systems do not allow new pieces of information to animate interests or reform judgments.

Concluding Thoughts

Developing an understanding of when authoritarians are apathetic and when they are engaged with an issue has clear implications for maintaining individual freedoms. In this regard, the distinction between authoritarian leaders and followers must be examined more closely. An authoritarian political structure has limited room at the top for leaders. This means that successful authoritarian leaders are few in number, whereas their followers are plentiful. Logic would dictate, then, that a psychologist studying authoritarianism in a large sample (where participants are plentiful) is primarily focused on authoritarian followers. Although followers and leaders probably share characteristics (e.g., willingness to aggress), they no doubt possess key differences as well. For example, we might not expect authoritarian leaders to possess limited knowledge about politics. Rather, they may be very shrewd in using extensive political “facts” and information to manipulate how issues are discussed and how their followers will react [see, e.g., Ezekiel’s (1995) riveting account of his field work with neo-Nazis and white supremacists in the United States]. Future work that compares authoritarian followers and leaders might shed light on important issues such as political behavior (i.e., as suggested earlier, it may be that most people who score high on authoritarianism are disinterested in politics and need the proddings of a leader to really get them going). As suggested by Altemeyer (1998), the new political variable of social dominance orientation (SDO) developed by Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, and Malle (1994) may be important for distinguishing authoritarian followers (assessed by RWA) and

authoritarian leaders (perhaps assessed by SDO). In any event, understanding the ways that political facts get distorted by authoritarian leaders and followers should shed light on why the latter seem to be falling through the cracks of the public information network.

APPENDIX: Year 2000 Presidential Election Items

Questions asked of the Michigan students 1 month before the November election

1. In what city was the 2000 Republican Convention? (Philadelphia) 22%
2. In what city was the 2000 Democratic Convention? (Los Angeles) 28%
3. Who is Albert Gore’s running mate for the presidential election? (Lieberman) 72%
4. Who is George W. Bush’s running mate for the presidential election? (Cheney) 57%

Smith sample B: Questions asked 1 week after the November election

1. Did Rick Lazio or Hillary Clinton become the new senator from the state of New York? (Clinton) 92%
2. How many electoral votes are required to be elected president of the U.S.? (270) 74%
3. Based on current results from the last election, how many electoral votes does George W. Bush now have? (246, but we accepted 240–250) 42%
4. Based on current results from the last election, how many electoral votes does Al Gore now have? (260, but we accepted 260–269) 26%
5. As it stands right now, did Bush or Gore win the *popular vote*? (Gore) 83%
6. Who won the open U.S. Senate seat in the state of Missouri? (Carnahan, but we also accepted variations of “The man who died recently”) 18%
7. How many electoral votes does the state of Florida have? (25) 51%
8. Approximately what percentage of the popular vote did Ralph Nader earn? (< 5%) 71%
9. Who was the presidential candidate for the Reform Party? (Buchanan) 61%

Note. Answers we marked as correct are noted in parentheses. Percentages indicate the proportion of participants who answered each question correctly.

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