‘The Seeds Had Been Planted. Trump Didn’t Do It Himself.’

May 15, 2024

Credit...Damon Winter/The New York Times

By Thomas B. Edsall

Over the past 30 years, authoritarianism has moved from the periphery to the center, even the core, of global politics, shaping not only the divide between left and right in the United States but also the conflict between the American-led alliance of democratic nations and the loose coalition of autocratic states including Russia, China, Iran and North Korea.

Marc Hetherington, a political scientist at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and a co-author of “Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics,” has tracked the partisanship of white voters in this country who are in the top 15 percent on measures of support for dictatorial rule.

Replying by email to my inquiry, Hetherington wrote:

In 1992, those whites scoring at the top of the authoritarianism scale split their two-party vote almost evenly between Bush and Clinton (51 to 49). In 2000 and 2004, the difference becomes statistically significant but still pretty small.

By 2012, those high-authoritarianism white voters went 68 to 32 for Romney over Obama. In both Trump elections it was 80 to 20 among those voters.

So from 50 Republican-50 Democrat to 80 Republican-20 Democrat in the space of 24 years.

The parallel pattern of conflicting values and priorities that has emerged between nations is the focus of a paper published last month, "Worldwide Divergence of Values" by Joshua Conrad Jackson and Dan Medvedev, both at the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business. The two authors analyzed data from seven studies conducted by the World Values Survey in 76 countries between 1981 and 2022.

Jackson and Medvedev found that over those years, "Values emphasizing tolerance and self-expression have diverged most sharply, especially between high-income Western countries and the rest of the world" and characterized this split as a clash between "emancipatory" values and values of "obedience."

I asked Medvedev whether authoritarianism represents the antithesis of a regime based on emancipatory principles, and he wrote back, "It certainly does seem that authoritarian regimes tend to reject values that we categorize as emancipative."

He said he would prefer to use the word "traditional" but "that's just my preference — I don't think it's incorrect to use 'authoritarian.'"

Jackson and Medvedev found that "the rate of value divergence" could be determined using seven questions producing "the highest divergence scores." Those were:

(1) justifiability of homosexuality, (2) justifiability of euthanasia, (3) importance of obedience of children, (4) justifiability of divorce, (5) justifiability of prostitution, (6) justifiability of suicide and (7) justifiability of abortion.

I wrote Jackson and Medvedev, asking about this divergence:

There has been a lot of speculation lately about new global divide pitting democracies led by the United States against a coalition including China, Russia, Iran and North Korea. Does this divide show up in your data on values differences between countries? Are there values differences between democratic countries and autocratic countries?

"The short answer is yes," Jackson and Medvedev wrote back and provided a detailed analysis in support of their reply.

Their data shows that the citizens in authoritarian countries tend to "believe that homosexuality and divorce are not justifiable" while those living in the United States, Japan, Germany and Canada "tend to believe that homosexuality and divorce are justifiable and disagree that obedience is an important value to teach their children."

More important, Jackson and Medvedev found that over those years, Russia, China and Iran have moved in an increasingly authoritarian direction while the democratic countries have moved in an emancipatory direction.

"These cultural differences were not always so stark; they have emerged over time," Jackson and Medvedev wrote. "These two groups of countries are sorting in their emancipative values over time. For example, Russia and the United States used to be quite similar in their values, but now the United States is closer to Germany in its values, and Russia is closer to Iran."

There is a debate among scholars of politics over the level of centrality that authoritarianism warrants and the forces that have elevated its salience, especially in American politics, where high levels of authoritarianism are increasingly linked to allegiance to the Republican Party.

What is clear is that authoritarianism has become an entrenched factor in partisan divisions, in global conflicts between nations and in the politics of diversity and race.

Rachel Kleinfeld, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment, wrote that the embedded character of authoritarianism in America "is like a barnacle attached to our affective polarization, a side effect of a political realignment being run through the uniquely polarizing effects of our first-past-the-post, winner-take-all system and primary structure."

In an email, Kleinfeld argued that the Great Recession played a pivotal role in stressing the importance of authoritarianism in American politics:

In 2008, the financial crisis created a great deal of anger and a desire for more government intervention. At the same time, an identity revolution was taking place in which group identity gained increased salience, especially in America.

Together these movements opened space for a political realignment: a long-dissatisfied group of voters who were pro-economic redistribution, but only to their "deserving" group, found political voice. These "more for me, less for thee" voters who hold left-wing redistributive economic ideas and socially conservative views formed Trump's primary base in 2016, and moved firmly into the Republican camp in 2020.

The two-party system in the United States, Kleinfeld contended, strengthens authoritarianism by failing to provide a vehicle specifically dedicated to the

agenda of the disgruntled electorate. As a result, these voters turned en masse in 2016 to an autocratic leader, Donald Trump, who, in his own words, became their "retribution."

This newly mobilized, angry electorate, Kleinfeld continued, is "not choosing the antidemocratic behavior — they are choosing their tribe, and the behavior comes with it. Authoritarian behavior is happening in America, not in Europe, because of our political structures."

In support of her argument, Kleinfeld cited a January report issued by the Democracy Fund, "Democracy Hypocrisy: Examining America's Fragile Democratic Convictions," that shows how Americans can endorse democratic principles and simultaneously support autocratic behavior by fellow partisans.

Among the report's conclusions:

- While a vast majority of Americans claimed to support democracy (more than 80 percent said democracy is a fairly or very good political system in surveys from 2017 to 2022), fewer than half consistently and uniformly supported democratic norms across multiple surveys.
- Support for democratic norms softened considerably when they conflicted with partisanship. For example, a solid majority of Trump and Biden supporters who rejected the idea of a "strong leader who doesn't have to bother with Congress and elections" nonetheless said their preferred U.S. president would be justified in taking unilateral action without explicit constitutional authority under several different scenarios.
- About 27 percent of Americans consistently and uniformly supported democratic norms in a battery of questions across multiple survey waves, including 45 percent of Democrats, 13 percent of Republicans and 18 percent of independents.
- In contrast to an overwhelming and consistent rejection of political violence across four survey waves, the violent events of Jan. 6, 2021, were viewed favorably by many Republicans. Almost half of Republicans (46 percent) described these events as acts of patriotism, and 72 percent disapproved of the House select committee that was formed to investigate them.

While much of the focus on authoritarianism in the United States has been on Republican voters, it is also a powerful force in the Democratic electorate.

In their 2018 paper "A Tale of Two Democrats: How Authoritarianism Divides the Democratic Party," five political scientists — Julie Wronski, Alexa Bankert, Karyn Amira, April A. Johnson and Lindsey C. Levitan — found that in 2016 "authoritarianism consistently predicts differences in primary voting among Democrats, particularly support for Hillary Clinton over Bernie Sanders." More specifically, "as a Democrat in the Cooperative Election Study survey sample

moves from the minimum value on the authoritarianism scale to the maximum value, the probability of voting for Clinton increases from 0.33 to 0.76."

Wronski and her colleagues determined that "Republicans are significantly more authoritarian than Democrats" but "the variation in authoritarianism is significantly higher among Democrats than Republicans." Put another way: The level of authoritarianism among the top half of Democrats is almost the same as it is among Republicans; the bottom half of Democrats demonstrates lower levels of authoritarianism than all Republicans.

One of the more intriguing discoveries is that growing racial diversity activates authoritarianism.

In their 2017 article "Racial Diversity and the Dynamics of Authoritarianism," Yamil Ricardo Velez and Howard Lavine, political scientists at Yale and the University of Minnesota, determined that racial diversity "magnifies the political impact of individual differences in the psychological disposition of authoritarianism."

"In white areas with minimal diversity, authoritarianism had no impact on racial prejudice, political intolerance and attitudes toward immigration," they wrote. "As diversity rises, however, authoritarianism plays an increasingly dominant role in political judgment. In diverse environments, authoritarians become more racially, ethnically and politically intolerant and nonauthoritarians less so."

Velez and Lavine defined authoritarianism as

a stable propensity concerned with minimizing difference and maximizing the "oneness and sameness" of people, ideas and behaviors or, more simply, as a preference for social conformity over individual autonomy. The worldview of authoritarians stresses conformity and obedience, as well as the belief that too much individual autonomy — and diversity in general — will result in social rebellion and instability of the status quo.

Authoritarians, Velez and Lavine wrote, "find diversity threatening, and they react to it with increasing racial resentment, anti-immigration beliefs and political intolerance. By contrast, nonauthoritarians react to diversity by becoming more politically tolerant and by embracing African Americans and immigrants."

As issues "related to race and ethnicity, crime, law and order, religion and gender" have gained centrality, according to Velez and Lavine, "two fundamental changes have occurred in the nature of partisanship."

The first is the creation of "an alignment between political identity and authoritarianism, such that high authoritarians have moved into the Republican Party and low authoritarians have moved into the Democratic Party."

The second is that "the notion of partisan identities as social identities — defining what Democrats and Republicans are stereotypically like as people — has intensified, leading the two partisan groups to hold increasingly negative feelings about each other."

As a result, the authors argued:

given that authoritarianism is (a) strongly linked to partisanship and (b) activated by ethnoracial diversity, it is likely that some of the "affective polarization" in contemporary American politics can be traced to authoritarianism. That is, perceptions of "us" and "them" have been magnified by the increasing alignment between party identification and authoritarianism.

Ariel Malka, a political scientist at Yeshiva University, contended in an email that there are further complications. "Public attitudes in Western democracies," Malka wrote, "vary on a sociocultural dimension, encompassing matters like traditional versus progressive views on sexual morality, gender, immigration, cultural diversity and so on."

Recently, however, Malka continued:

some evidence has emerged that the anti-immigrant and nativist parts of this attitude package are becoming somewhat detached from the parts having to do with gender and sexuality, especially among younger citizens. Indeed, there is a meaningful contingent of far-right voters who combine liberal attitudes on gender and sexuality with nativist and anti-immigrant stances.

What do these trends suggest politically? According to Malka:

As for how this relates to democratic preferences, citizens who hold traditional cultural stances on a range of matters tend, on average, to be more open to authoritarian governance and to violations of democratic norms. So there is some basis for concern that antidemocratic appeals will meet a relatively receptive audience on the right at a time of inflamed sociocultural divisions.

I asked Pippa Norris, a political scientist at Harvard, about the rising salience of authoritarianism, and she provided a summary of her forthcoming book, "The Cultural Roots of Democratic Backsliding." In a description of the book on her website, Norris wrote:

Historical and journalistic accounts often blame the actions of specific strongman leaders and their enablers for democratic backsliding — Trump for the Jan. 6 insurrection in America, Modi for the erosion of minority rights in India, Netanyahu for weakening the powers of the Supreme Court in Israel and so on. But contingent narratives remain unsatisfactory to explain a general phenomenon, they fail to explain why ordinary citizens in longstanding

democracies voted these leaders into power in the first place, and the direction of causality in this relationship remains unresolved.

Her answer, in two steps.

First:

Deep-rooted and profound cultural changes have provoked a backlash among traditional social conservatives in the electorate. A wide range of conventional moral values and beliefs, once hegemonic, are under threat today in many modern societies. Value shifts are exemplified by secularization eroding the importance of religious practices and teachings, declining respect for the institutions of marriage and the family and more fluid rather than fixed notions of social identities based on gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, community ties and national citizenship. An extensive literature has demonstrated that the "silent revolution" of the 1960s and 1970s has gradually led to growing social liberalism, recognizing the principles of diversity, inclusion and equality, including support for issues such as equality for women and men in the home and work force, recognition of L.G.B.T.Q. rights and the importance of strengthening minority rights.

These trends, in turn, have "gradually undermined the majority status of traditional social conservatives in society and threatened conventional moral beliefs."

Second:

Authoritarian populist forces further stoke fears and exploit grievances among social conservatives. If these political parties manage to gain elected office through becoming the largest party in government or if their leaders win the presidency, they gain the capacity to dismantle constitutional checks and balances, like rule of law, through processes of piecemeal or wholesale executive aggrandizement.

For a detailed examination of the rise of authoritarianism, I return to Hetherington, the political scientist I cited at the start of this column. In his email, Hetherington wrote:

The tilt toward the Republicans among more authoritarian voters began in the early 2000s because the issue agenda began to change. Keep in mind, so-called authoritarians aren't people who are thirsting to do away with democratic norms. Rather they view the world as full of dangers. Order and strength are what, in their view, provide an antidote to those dangers. Order comes in the form of old traditions and conventions as well. When they find a party or a candidate who provides it, they support it. When a party or candidate wants to break from those traditions and conventions, they'll oppose them.

Until the 2000s, the main line of debate had to do with how big government ought to be. Maintaining order and tradition isn't very strongly related to how big people think the government ought to be. The dividing line in party conflict started to evolve late in the 20th century. Cultural and moral issues took center stage. As that happened, authoritarian-minded voters, looking for order, security and tradition, moved to the Republicans in droves. When people talk about the Republicans attracting working-class whites, these are the specific working-class whites that the G.O.P.'s agenda attracted.

As such, the movement of these voters to the G.O.P. long predated Trump. His rhetoric has made this line of conflict between the parties even sharper than before. So that percentage of high-scoring authoritarian voters for Trump is higher than it was for Bush, McCain and Romney. But that group was moving that way long before 2016. The seeds had been planted. Trump didn't do it himself.

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