

JOIBS: May 2025. ISSN 2992-9253

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Can Liberals Also Be Authoritarians? Comment on Conway & Houck (2025)

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Funding: None.

Competing interests: None.

Citation: Redding, R. (2025). Can liberals also be authoritarian? Comment on Conway & Houck (2025). *Journal of Open Inquiry in the Behavioral Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.58408/issn.2992-9253.2025.04.03.0002>

What explains the apparent ideological incongruence or cognitive dissonance among: (1) conservatives who like the authoritarianism of liberal authoritarian leaders despite the fact that they are opposed to those leaders ideologically, and (2) liberals who like the authoritarianism of conservative authoritarian leaders despite being opposed to those leaders ideologically and irrespective of the fact that liberals supposedly eschew authoritarianism? At first blush, one might question whether these incongruent authoritarians truly exist in any significant number or if it simply reflects measurement error in the studies that have found them. As the authors point out, however, numerous studies conducted in different countries have found both types of authoritarians.

Why do these “conservative left-wing authoritarians” and “liberal right-wing authoritarians” both like the authoritarianism of leaders from the opposing political party? Are right-wing authoritarians the same as left-wing authoritarians in terms of the psychology underlying their preference that “authority figures rule their political opponents with an iron hand” (p. 2), and are both groups equally authoritarian?

At bottom, this boils down to the question of whether authoritarianism and conservatism are coextensive and essentially the same thing, as many (liberal) psychologists and social scientists have long argued (e.g., Adorno et al., 1950; Altemeyer, 1981; Jost et al., 2003; Jost, 2017; Stone, 1980), or does authoritarianism per se exist apart from ideology? Can liberals also be authoritarians, as recent research suggests (Costello, 2023)?

This paper reports the results of a study designed to shed light on this question, analyzing data from 14 studies involving 10,360 participants and using various measures of authoritarianism (using measures of right-wing as well as left-wing authoritarianism), ideology, ideological ambivalence, religiosity, ecological threat, and outgroup negativity.

Using data from the 14 studies, the authors test four possible theories to explain the psychology

of incongruent authoritarians. These theories suggest that they are: (1) simply ideologically ambivalent, (2) that liberal incongruent authoritarians are really conservatives, (3) that both authoritarians are high in religiosity, which accounts for their authoritarian bent, and/or (4) that both authoritarians are highly sensitive to perceived threats and a dangerous world, which accounts for their authoritarianism.

Unfortunately, the results support each of the theories, but only modestly so. Thus, they fail to inform which theory, if any, best explains incongruent authoritarianism. Given these findings, the authors propose an overarching integrative theory that encapsulates all four theories. They also argue that the degree to which these two groups may be driven by authoritarianism versus ideology may be context-specific, as a function of the relevance and salience of ideological factors as compared to more apolitical authoritarian factors. This section of the paper (“Integrative Framework: Moderation Versus Domain-Specific Matching”), however, is difficult to digest and understand, particularly for someone who does not work in this area – I would suggest a rewrite of this section.

As for the question of whether liberal authoritarians really exist or are simply conservatives in disguise – i.e., does authoritarianism = conservatism, the data suggest that this is not the case. There are both liberal and conservative authoritarians, though the results do suggest that authoritarianism is somewhat stronger on the right than on the left. Of course, there are just as many – if not more – examples of authoritarian leftist leaders and regimes (in the many communist countries) as there are rightist leaders and regimes, but political leadership and governments are somewhat different than individuals when talking about the psychology of authoritarianism. The authors do not, however, address the issue of whether there are more authoritarians (or incongruent authoritarians) on the extreme left versus the extreme right (see McClosky & Chong, 1985). Finally, I would note that the discussion of the “The Asymmetry Debate” (p. 23) is also difficult to follow and understand for those who do not work in this area – I would suggest a rewrite of this section as well.

I began this review by noting that psychologists and other social scientists (virtually all of whom are politically liberal) have frequently conflated authoritarianism with conservatism while at the same time largely denying that leftists could be authoritarian (e.g., Jost et al., 2003; Jost, 2017). As Costello (2023) explains, there has been much political bias in the ways in which authoritarianism has been measured, just as there has been considerable ideological and political bias in psychological research generally when it comes to sociopolitical issues (Duarte et al., 2015; Frisby et al., 2023; Redding, 2001). The measures used have often been constructed in such a way to identify right-wing authoritarianism but not left-wing authoritarianism and/or they almost completely conflate conservative ideology with authoritarianism (Costello, 2023).

The current study, which used measures of right-wing authoritarianism as well as left-wing authoritarianism, shows that there are authoritarians on the left as well as the right, though a bit more so on the right. My guess is that this finding is consistent with what most people (at least those not invested in right- or left-wing ideology) think describes the situation when it comes to authoritarianism on the right and the left. It should help refute the notion that just one side of the ideological spectrum can be authoritarian.

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